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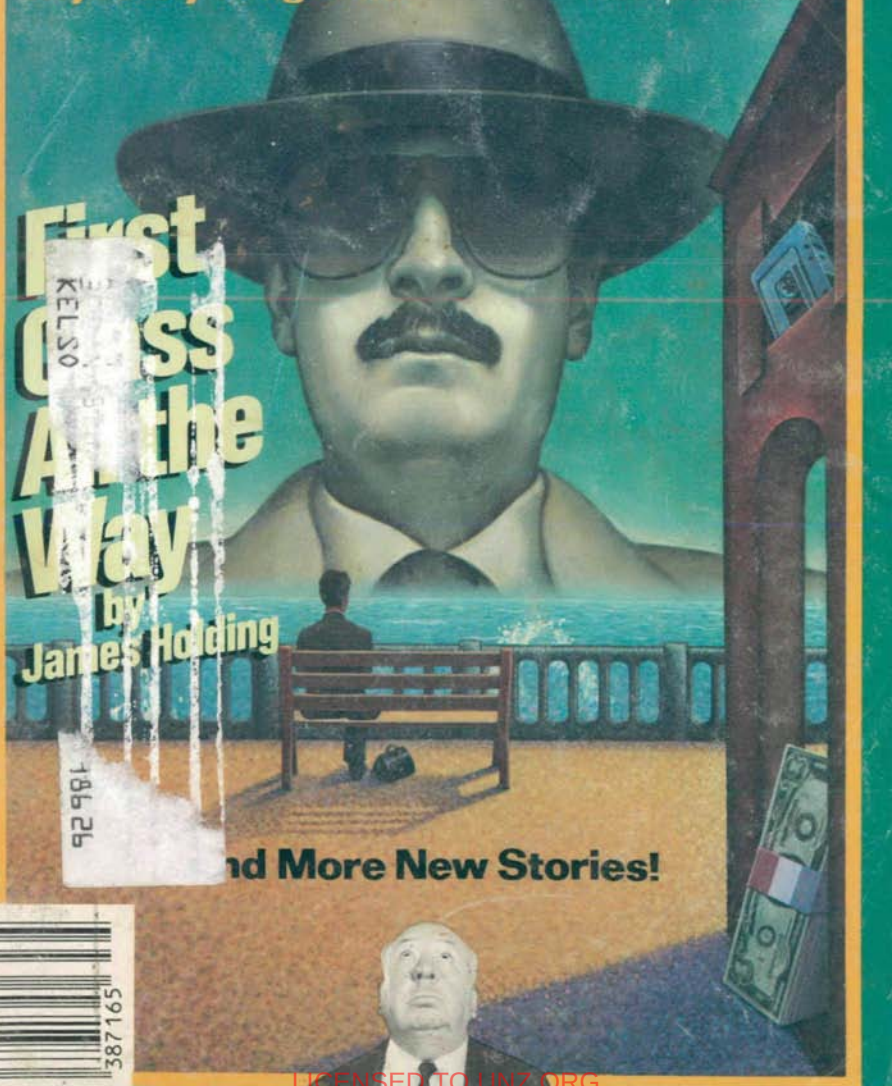
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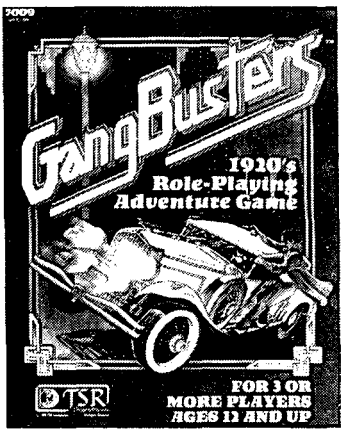
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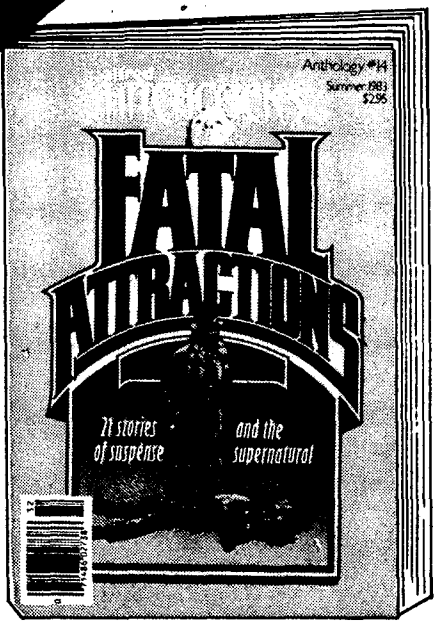
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by Elana Lore

Cathleen Jordan's recent editorial (March, 1983) on the difficulties of writing a compelling spouse murder story prompted me to respond with my own list of difficult-to-write plots.

As a former editor of both AHMM and EQMM, I have read lots and lots of manuscripts. When you do that, you discover things that beginning writers often like to try but that don't work as a rule, unless they have some marvelous new way of presenting the idea.

For instance, the story about the author who has been rejected so many times that he decides to put poison on the glue of the return envelope. This may tell your editor more about you than you would like to have known, and you may never see your manuscript again.

A story that has been told again and again over the years, but that keeps turning up, is the man-in-the-back-seat story. It runs something like this: A woman gets into her car at night to drive home. Another car or a van starts to follow her. She panics, thinking the other driver means to do her harm. The story always ends with the person following her rescuing her from a man he has seen hiding in the back seat of her car.

The "letter" story is a particularly difficult one to do well. It involves the exchange of letters between two people in which the correspondence becomes more and more heated, and inevitably resulting in the death of the person one would have predicted. That kind of story doesn't seem to hold readers' attention long, and there isn't much room for surprise.

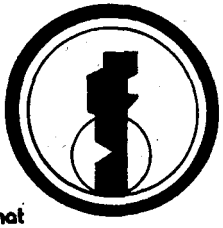
A point of confusion among some writers is the distinction between a war story and a murder mystery. You can certainly have a murder mystery occurring in a wartime setting, but a story about a soldier killing an enemy soldier in a battle

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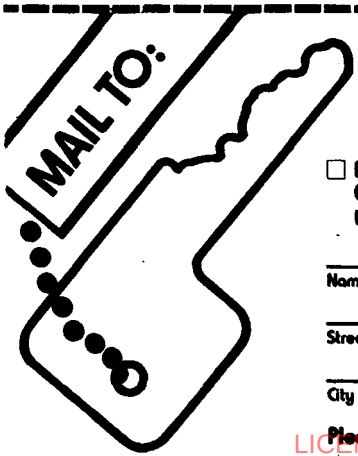
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doesn't qualify.

Some people also believe that if they set a story in an area where people speak with some sort of accent, the story must be done entirely in that region's dialect. Not so, my friends. It's very difficult to do well—and is very distracting when it's done poorly.

On a more humorous note, I'd like to mention murder weapons. It's all right to be clever, but you really do have to be credible. Strange Rube Goldberg devices take a lot of time to explain in a story, and it's difficult to believe that a complicated weapon strung all around a room, one that does unbelievable types of damage to the human body, would not be noticed by the potential victim.

I hope I haven't discouraged anyone from trying to write for AHMM (or any other magazine, for that matter), but given the number of submissions magazines usually get, there isn't much time for an editor to explain these kinds of things to potential writers. If such tips help people avoid the kinds of stories that don't work, we won't have to spend quite so much time worrying about foreign substances on the glue of your return envelopes.

(Elana Lore was also guest editor of the recent anthology, Alfred Hitchcock's Fatal Attractions.)

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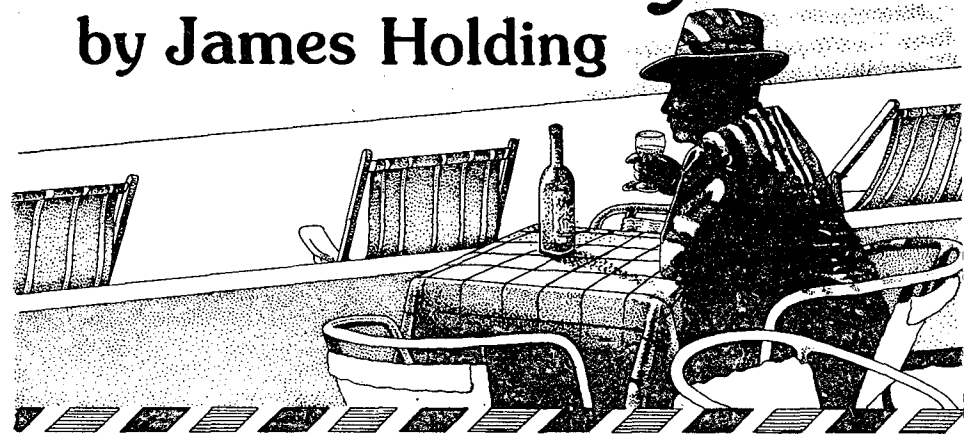
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FICTION

First Class All the Way

by James Holding



If Mean Gene Faldi's mother hadn't died, Charlie Bell figured he'd probably never have had the chance to run that little errand for Big Nick Muscaro.

After all, Gene had managed in six years to work his way up to being Big Nick's right-hand man when it came to handling important stuff, while Charlie Bell was a virtual newcomer to the organization. He'd put in less than two years doing odd jobs for Muscaro and was still merely one of the numerous humble soldiers in Nick's outfit.

But fortunately for Charlie Bell, Gene's mother *did* die of a massive heart attack out in California on the twelfth day of May, and Gene had to fly out there right away to take charge of things.

It couldn't have happened at

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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a worse time as far as Big Nick was concerned. But what was Nick supposed to do? A guy's mother is a guy's mother, and Nick wasn't totally without a heart inside that massive frame, although many of his people thought so, including, incidentally, Charlie Bell.

The night Mean Gene left for the Coast, Big Nick sent John Muntz and his Plymouth Fury to pick up Charlie Bell at his crummy rooming house on the West Side. Charlie's place was an old studio apartment without any of the comforts of home except for a color TV set and a black and tan Himalayan cat that Charlie had named Bonzo for some obscure reason when he bought him as a kitten.

John Muntz was a kind of combination chauffeur-accountant-bodyguard-handyman for Muscaro. He found Charlie watching an old Carol Burnett re-run on his TV. John said, "Come on, Charlie. The boss wants to see you. Right away. No excuses. I got my Fury outside to drive you."

Charlie jumped up and switched off his TV set. Incredulously he said, "The boss wants to see *me?*" He was in mild shock. "You got any idea why?" Rapidly, Charlie reviewed in his mind his recent activities, trying to isolate a mistake he'd made, a job he'd bungled, something that could account for this unexpected summons. He couldn't think of any.

John said, "All they told me was that Gene Faldi's old lady died today in California, Gene's gone out there to handle her funeral, and the boss wants to see you right away. So are you coming or not?"

"I'm coming," said Charlie. "Let me get my raincoat." His uneasiness began to yield to a faint excitement. Maybe, he thought, Big Nick wants me to fill in for Gene on some job while he's away burying his mother. That would be a real break for me. He shrugged into his raincoat while Bonzo rubbed against John's ankle, purring like a vacuum cleaner.

That's got to be it, Charlie thought, as he turned out the lamp beside the easy chair from which he watched TV. Something to do with Gene's being away. Despite himself he began to feel a little bit like an understudy when he hears the star of the show is home in bed spraying his sore throat with Lavoris and can't go on tonight.

He followed John out to the Fury at the curb. The off-and-on drizzle that had persisted all day had now settled down to a solid, drenching rain. John Muntz, who served as the driver in certain of Big Nick Muscaro's ventures, wheeled the Fury effortlessly along the wet

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streets and shortly pulled up in front of The Best Shot Bar on West End Avenue.

Charlie said, "Here? I thought you meant at Big Nick's place."

"This *is* Big Nick's place," answered John, grinning, "or one of them anyway." Which was true. Everybody knew that Big Nick bankrolled The Best Shot. It was a favorite hangout for Big Nick's boys when they were not otherwise engaged.

"Oh," said Charlie, feeling somehow disappointed. He'd had a sort of sneaking hope that he'd get a chance to see the fancy co-op apartment Big Nick owned on Riverside Drive. He got out of the car. "Thanks for the ride."

"Niente," said John. "Last booth on the right." He gunned the Fury and disappeared around the corner in a splash of puddle water.

Charlie went into The Best Shot and walked along the length of the central bar to the back booth on the right, and sure enough, there was Big Nick Muscaro, all six foot four and two hundred and fifty pounds of him, dressed in his usual dark pinstriped suit and heavy black shoes, sucking on a Perrier water and lime twist. "You gotta stay sober in our business," he was fond of saying, "or you'll end up with your tail in a crack." Or words to that effect. None of the boys paid any attention to this obvious nonsense; everybody drank anything they damn well pleased. Charlie's was Black and White rocks. Freedom of choice. Guaranteed by the Constitution.

Charlie slid into the booth across from Nick. Nick said, "Hi, Carlo." He went right on calling Charlie Carlo, although everybody else had called him Charlie since he'd legally changed his name from Carlo Bellini to Charlie Bell.

"John told me you wanted to see me," Charlie said. "I came as quick as I could." He was conscious of the astringent odor of Big Nick's witch hazel aftershave.

Nick nodded his big head and put his stony eyes on Charlie's face and kept them there until Charlie began to feel uncomfortable. Big Nick had the air of a man who is sizing up a steer to see if it's ready for slaughter. Finally he said, "Gene's mother could of died last week. Or waited until week after next. But no, she has to pick today, the old bag."

He obviously didn't expect an answer so Charlie didn't give him one.

"Throws a monkey wrench into the works. Gene's going to California right now," Nick went on. "That's why I sent for you."

"Yeah?" Charlie said. He couldn't trust himself to say

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more. His excitement was mounting.

"I want you to take over one of Gene's operations," Big Nick said, "now that he's not here to handle it himself. It's something that can't wait."

"What operation is that?"

"What it is, you just run a little errand for me, Carlo. To France."

"France!" Charlie's surprise was reflected in his tone.

"Yeah. France." Big Nick smiled. When he smiled, wrinkles a quarter inch deep bracketed his mouth, like desert gullies around a dry water hole. The expression of his eyes didn't change much, though. "You ever been there, Carlo?"

"Not me. Not even Europe."

"Well, now's your chance, then. You'll like it, Carlo. It's a nice place. Gene likes it. Good place for a vacation."

Charlie said, "I don't speak any French, Nick."

"Neither does Gene. No problem. Every Frenchman over five years old can speak American."

"Fine, then. I just didn't want to blow the job through ignorance of the language," said Charlie. "Gene's run this errand for you before, right?"

"Sure. Two or three times. Damn fool's mother had to die this time, though." Nick sounded disgusted with her thoughtlessness.

"I never knew that Gene went to France for you," said Charlie.

"Why should you?" Nick squinted at Charlie. "It was none of your business."

"Till now, is that it?" Charlie thought he ought to show a little spunk.

"That's right, Carlo. Now you're going to pinch-hit for Gene, it *is* your business. So did you ever hear of a place in France called Nice. You spell it like 'nice' but you say it like 'niece.'"

"Down in the southern part somewhere?"

"On the Mediterranean, yeah. That's where you're going, Carlo. To Nice. I never been there myself, understand, but I hear they got lots of sunlight like Florida, and open gambling, and plenty of pretty scenery."

Charlie was enthusiastic. "Sounds fine to me," he said. "Just wind me up and point me. What's the errand?"

Big Nick told Charlie what the errand was and how to run it, down to the last detail. Charlie's eyes kept getting rounder and rounder as Nick talked. When Nick finished, he paused for breath, took another sip of Perrier and lime, and asked, "You got all that, Carlo?"

Charlie nodded, his eyes bright. "You bet, Nick," he said. "I can handle it. But" his voice trailed off for a second,

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then he gathered his nerve and asked the question that had been puzzling him all along "... why'd you pick *me* for the job, Nick? Some of the other boys got a lot more experience than me."

"Two reasons," said Big Nick mildly. "The most important one is that you look enough like Mean Gene Faldi to be his cousin or even his brother, maybe. Didn't you ever notice that?"

"Hell, no!" Charlie was stunned.

Big Nick said, "Go over to the bar and get us another drink, Carlo, and while you're there, look in the backbar mirror."

Charlie, with a funny look on his face, complied. When he returned to the booth with the fresh drinks, he admitted, "Yeah. I guess you're right. There's a little resemblance, I suppose."

"Enough so you can use Gene's passport if you trim your sideburns up an inch higher and get your hair cut shorter. It's the same color as Gene's. Then you put on some dark glasses, and *you* could of gone out to bury Gene's mother and nobody would of known the difference. Least of all, his mother." Again the deep gullies appeared around Big Nick's mouth. Another smile. Two in five minutes. Some kind of a record, probably, Charlie thought. Big Nick pulled a passport from his pocket and handed it across to Charlie. "Look at his passport picture, Carlo. You could be twins."

Charlie took a long look, a doubtful look. "If you say so, Nick."

"I say so. Stick that passport in your pocket and don't lose it, for God's sake. You'll need it here when you leave, and in France when you get there."

Charlie tucked Gene's passport away. Then he looked sideways at Nick and said diffidently, "But that's a hell of a lot of money to trust me with, Nick. I'm not sure I like that part of it." He gave Nick a half grin. "It would take a goddam saint not to be tempted to take your money and run."

"I know that, Carlo. That's why I've clued Guido in on this." Nick jerked a thumb over his shoulder and Charlie saw a tall, thin, gangling man with a dour expression on his long face and only one ear on his head. He had a drink in his hand and was leaning against the bar, watching Big Nick and Charlie unwinkingly. When Charlie looked over at him, his face contorted and he grinned an exaggerated grin, showing his teeth like a snarling dog.

Charlie had heard of Guido but he'd never seen him in the flesh before. Guido was Big Nick's enforcer—the man who saw to it that Big Nick Muscaro

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got his way in almost everything. Charlie felt a slight chill slide up the middle of his back. Nick was saying, "Don't yield to temptation, Carlo. Don't try to run with the money. If you do, Guido will find you, wherever you run to, and fix it so you'll never need money again, ever. Do you understand what I'm saying?" There were no smile gullies around Nick's mouth now.

"Sure, sure," Charlie said, trying to keep his voice from trembling. He knew he'd be seeing Guido's cadaverous face and one-eared smile in his nightmares for some time to come.

"Is . . . ah . . . Guido coming with me to France?"

Nick shook his head. "No way. You're on your own, Carlo. Just think about him once in a while, that's all."

After a moment of silence, Charlie asked, "What's the second reason you picked me for this job? You said there were two."

"Because you're ambitious and work hard and follow orders and, so far, you been a good soldier, Carlo. Is that enough of a reason?"

Charlie grinned and, greatly daring, said, "I didn't think you cared, Nick."

"I care about your errand. That's what I care about. You bring it off and there's a promotion in it for you. And a nice cut. Okay?"

"Okay." Charlie downed what was left of his second scotch. "Do you mind going over it again for me? So I'll be sure I've got it down pat?"

Two days later, Charlie was on the Concorde, heading for Paris, flying so fast the plane didn't seem to be moving at all.

It was early evening when Charlie checked into his hotel in Nice. The lights that define the curving waterfront drive bordering the Bay of Angels had not yet come on, but it was still light enough for Charlie to confirm the impression he'd gained on the ride in from the airport: that Nice was a beautiful, romantic, and, yes, glamorous town. Charlie smiled to himself, remembering Big Nick's lesson on how to pronounce the city's name.

He walked across the hotel's ornate lobby to the desk and said to the studious-looking, bespectacled man behind it, "I think you have a reservation for me? Eugene Faldi from New York?"

"Yes, monsieur," said the desk clerk, checking his records. "Welcome to Nice. We have given you Room 619, Monsieur Faldi, one of our best rooms, with a lovely view of the water. We hope that will be satisfactory?"

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"It really sounds great," said Charlie.

The desk clerk nodded, beckoned a uniformed bellboy, handed him the key to 619, and said something to him in machine-gun French of which Charlie understood only two words, "Monsieur Faldi." Then to Charlie in English again, "We hope you enjoy your stay, monsieur. Your reservation was for four days. Is that correct?"

"Near enough," Charlie replied. "I want to see some of the famous places around here like, you know, Monte Carlo and Cannes." Charlie pronounced it "cans."

"May I have your passport, please? For the authorities, you understand. It will be returned to you when you leave." The man held out his hand.

"Certainly," said Charlie calmly, although his heart skipped a beat and he fumbled a little before drawing Mean Gene Faldi's passport from his pocket and handing it over. He accepted a pen from the clerk with which to fill in the registration card placed before him. Then, with the bored air of a man who has performed that tiresome task uncounted times, he boldly dashed off Gene Faldi's signature. It was quite a close match for the genuine one on the passport. "Can you arrange to get me a rental car for tomorrow?" he asked.

"Of course. We have an agency right here in the hotel. Would you like a limousine with chauffeur?"

"No," said Charlie, "I don't think so. I like to do my own driving. Feel more independent, you know?"

"*Bien.* Then a Renault, perhaps?" he asked. "With automatic shift?"

"Renault," said Charlie, considering. "That's the French car with the funny-shaped nose, isn't it?"

With a faint edge of sarcasm in the words, the desk clerk said, "Or we can no doubt arrange to supply you with one of your own excellent Chevrolets, if you prefer."

"A Chevrolet? Great! Let's make it a Chevrolet. For about nine tomorrow morning?"

"It will be waiting for you." The desk clerk turned away.

Charlie's room, 619, proved to be everything the desk clerk promised. King-sized, beautifully furnished, with an elegantly appointed private bath and a wide, lightly curtained window looking out over the Mediterranean, which had now retreated into invisibility behind the glare of the Promenade des Anglais's sodium lights.

After the bellboy left, Charlie took off his jacket and lay down on the bed for a small nap before dinner.

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The two days that followed saw Charlie Bell acting the American tourist to the hilt. With the aid of the maps furnished by the car rental agency, and the slim guidebook he had brought with him in his suitcase, he put several kilometers on the Chevy's odometer, and enjoyed every one of them.

He drove over the Grand Corniche to Monte Carlo, stopping en route to visit Eze, that curious, medieval, fortress-like town that perches far above the Mediterranean on its own pinnacle of rock. In Monte Carlo, he regaled himself with an excellent luncheon at the Cafe de Paris: pink langustinos, a delicate spinach souffle, and a white wine, recommended by the sommelier, that was so deliciously dry it made Charlie wonder if it could really be liquid.

After lunch, he drove on along the coast road to Menton, then through Bordighera to San Remo. What American tourist, born Bellini, could resist the chance to stand, however briefly, on the native soil of his ancestors? Then back to Monte Carlo in time for an hour's gambling at the Casino (and a loss of five hundred francs at roulette) before returning to Nice for a late dinner. He slept the dreamless sleep of a weary tourist that night.

The second day his self-conducted tour led him westward to Cagnes, then north to the ancient village of St. Paul de Vence, where he trod the steep, narrow, enchanting walkways until his feet refused further punishment and he settled down for luncheon at an inn called Les Columbes d'Or, where white doves, not golden ones, cooed at him from the red tile roof of the dining terrace. He followed luncheon with a quick survey of the paintings on display at the inn, then returned to his car and headed west again to Grasse because his guidebook told him it smelled splendidly of flowers, due to the many flower perfumes manufactured there. The wind was in the wrong direction that day, perhaps, for Charlie got only one faint whiff of perfumed air. Yet that one whiff pleased him mightily, for Charlie Bell was at heart a romantic.

From Grasse he descended by easy stages from the hills to the sea again, driving into Cannes in the late afternoon. He parked his car at a public lot and, despite his tired feet, took a short stroll along the beach boulevard, La Croisette, taking particular pleasure in seeing in the flesh the lovely hotel where Grace Kelly had been staying when she met Cary Grant in that great old movie *To Catch a Thief.*

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At one point in his casual promenade along La Croisette, he passed the branch shop of a famous Parisian jeweler. Almost on impulse, he entered and bought himself a very thin Piaget wristwatch at a very fat price, feeling, as he did so, a twinge of guilt for spending Big Nick Muscaro's money so freely. But Big Nick, handing him his airplane tickets before he left New York, had said, "I want you to go first class all the way, Charlie. Act like a rich tourist." That's what he'd said, wasn't it? Okay, Charlie would follow orders as usual.

A few steps farther along, he stopped in a fancy *parfumerie* and purchased four boxes of expensive French bath powder, informing the chic young lady who waited on him that they were small remembrances for his secretary, his sister, his niece, and his Aunt Martha back home in New York.

The chic salesgirl twinkled at him and asked, "Nothing for your wife, monsieur?"

"I'm not married," said Charlie, looking glum.

"Oh, sorry, monsieur." She hastily placed the powder boxes in a large white paper bag with the name of the shop prominently displayed upon it. Then she made out a sales slip and thrust that into the bag as well. "You may need this when you go through U.S. Customs."

"Thanks," said Charlie. Then thought to himself, why not, and asked the salesgirl if there were a wine shop nearby.

She nodded, still apologetic for her gaffe, and directed him to keep right on walking *tout droit* up La Croisette for another block and *voilà*.

Charlie followed directions and at the wine shop bought himself the most expensive bottle of French cognac in the place. First class all the way.

After depositing his purchases in the trunk of his car, Charlie descended to the beach where late sunbathers, many in string bikinis, were enjoying the welcome warmth of May after a chilly winter season. Charlie enjoyed the string bikinis, however, more than the weather, so much so that he rented a beach chair and sat in it until the sun went down in a beautiful blaze of color behind low clouds. Then he consulted his guidebook and chose a restaurant at the western extremity of La Croisette as a likely eating spot. There he ingested an excellent dinner of four courses, with two kinds of wine to accompany them.

He was back in his room in Nice by ten o'clock. He undressed, got into his pajamas, set his travel alarm clock for three o'clock in the morning, and crawled into bed, a weary man.

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The subdued tinkle of the alarm woke him at three. He stretched, practiced a few groans of pain, then reached for his bedside telephone and called the hotel desk.

The night man answered promptly. "Yes, monsieur?"

Charlie groaned. "I'm sick," he said in a thready voice. "I think I'm having a heart attack or something. I've got this big pain in my chest. What do I do?"

"Perhaps it is merely indigestion," the clerk suggested helpfully. "From overeating, perhaps?"

"Whatever it is, I need help. Do you have a house doctor?"

"Not in residence, no. But Dr. DuBois, on Boulevard Victor Hugo very close by, is on call to attend ill hotel guests. Shall I call him for you?"

"Please," said Charlie. "Tell him to hurry, will you?"

Fifteen minutes later, Dr. DuBois tapped lightly on Charlie's door. "Come in," Charlie called. "It's not locked."

Dr. DuBois entered and shut the door very quietly behind him. He was short and rather plump, with apple-red cheeks, a professional smile, and clothes thrown on in such slapdash fashion that Charlie knew he had just been roused from his bed. He carried a black medical bag, Charlie noted with a certain nostalgia, like those American doctors used to carry when they made house calls.

His English, when he spoke, was not as pure as the desk clerk's, but easily comprehensible. "The desk clerk," said Dr. DuBois, "tells me you are feeling ill?"

Charlie groaned. "Right," he said. "I've got this big pain right here." He touched his breastbone.

"Well, let's have a look at you." Dr. DuBois opened his medical bag. He withdrew a stethoscope from it and sat down on the edge of Charlie's bed. Charlie, still recumbent, unbuttoned his pajama jacket.

Dr. DuBois went carefully over Charlie with his stethoscope, then took his temperature, and finally a blood pressure reading. He said nothing until he had returned his instruments to his bag. At length, regarding Charlie with a placid but expectant gaze, he said, "You are not having a heart attack, monsieur. In fact, you are not ill at all. Furthermore," he paused and puffed out his cheeks, "you are not Monsieur Faldi."

"Oh," said Charlie, lying rigid while he rebuttoned his pajama jacket.

The doctor shook his head. "Nevertheless, how do you like our city?"

Charlie relaxed a little. "It's naughty but it's nice," he replied, just as Big Nick Muscaro

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had coached him.

"And the Baie des Anges?"

Charlie gave him the rest of the recognition signal. "I prefer the angels of the Bay to the English of the Promenade."

"Excellent," said Dr. DuBois, smiling now. "What happened to Monsieur Faldi?"

"His mother died suddenly. I had to take his place. I'm Charlie Bell."

"Plaisir." The doctor formally shook hands. "You have acted the tourist as we requested?"

"You bet," said Charlie. "Monte Carlo, Cannes, the works." He paused. "What's the idea of the tourist cover, anyhow? Wouldn't it be simpler for everybody if I just checked into the hotel for one night, got sick, made the pickup from you, and then checked out again, cured, the next morning?"

"Ah," said the doctor, "pardon me, but that tourism is for my protection as well as yours. If too many American tourists, staying only one night at the hotel, became ill enough in the middle of the night to need a physician, the hotel people would begin to think it very odd, would they not?"

Charlie stared. "You mean the hotel isn't in on the deal?"

"Not even the night desk clerk. Security, *vous savez?*"

"Well," said Charlie, "don't the hotel people think it's kind of funny that an American tourist named Eugene Faldi gets sick and needs a doctor every time he stays here?"

DuBois laughed. "You don't understand, monsieur. Faldi did not stay at this hotel on his previous visits. He stayed at other hotels in this immediate area for which I am also on call as night physician, do you see?"

"Wow!" said Charlie softly. "You must not get a lot of sleep, doc."

"I get enough. And I am well paid for any I miss." The doctor smiled again. "You must understand that this deviousness is necessary, since we have many other customers for our . . . ah . . . product besides Monsieur Muscaro."

"I see. Not that I didn't get a big kick out of the tourist bit. It was great!"

"I am glad you enjoyed it. Now, in order that I may not lose too much sleep tonight, can we get down to business?"

"Sure. Do you have the proper medicine for my illness, doctor?"

"If you have the proper pharmacist's fee. Have you?"

Charlie sat up in bed, reached down under the covers near the footboard, and brought forth the solidly packed money belt that had been enlarging his waist measurement every minute of the time since he had left New York.

Dr. DuBois, meanwhile,

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opened his black bag and delved deep into it. Charlie heard the snick of a clasp being released, and after a moment's tugging, the doctor pulled out of his bag a cellophane-wrapped package about the size and shape of a one pound bag of sugar. The compacted white powder inside the cellophane was not sugar, however. The doctor passed this package to Charlie in exchange for the money belt. Charlie moistened a fingertip, dipped into the cellophane bag, and touched a few grains of the white powder to his tongue. Then he nodded his approval. "That's the right medicine, all right," he said. "One hundred percent."

Dr. DuBois was counting the stacks of hundred dollar bills Charlie's money belt had contained. He looked up briefly at Charlie's remark and said, "Not quite a hundred percent, monsieur. Nearer ninety. But anyway . . ." he laughed . . . "it is far purer now than it will be when your Monsieur Muscaro prepares it for sale on the street." He resumed counting Charlie's money. Finally he sighed with satisfaction and, handing the empty money belt back to Charlie, stowed the stacks of bills away in the false bottom of his bag. They made it bulge unnaturally; Dr. DuBois was not visibly disturbed by that, however. "The pharmacist's fee, also, is correct," he said.

Charlie put the bag under his pillow. "What will you tell the desk?"

"That monsieur has merely a severe indigestion. That I have left you an antacid mixture to counter it. That you should be all right by morning. And that they should put my fee on your bill." He paused. "What time is your flight tomorrow?"

"Ten thirty."

"Have a good trip. You should be feeling fine by then. Thank Monsieur Muscaro for the order. And convey my personal sympathy to Monsieur Faldi for his mother's death."

"I'll do that. And thank *you*, Dr. DuBois, for your courtesy."

"Rien," said the doctor. He left Charlie's room as quietly as he had arrived.

It took Charlie an hour to remove the laminated cardboard bottoms of the four boxes of bath powder he had bought for his secretary, his sister, his niece, and his Aunt Martha; to flush the bath powder down the toilet in cautious doses; to replace the bath powder with the contents of his cellophane bag; and to reaffix their cardboard bottoms to the powder boxes with a transparent glue—all without in any way disturbing the paper seal over the powder or the large powder puff that rested upon it. Thus, when the

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boxes were opened from the top in the normal fashion, they would appear as fresh, pristine, and untampered-with as when they left the chic *parfumerie* on La Croisette in Cannes.

It was a delicate, painstaking operation, and Charlie was tired when he finished. He crawled back into bed and slept comfortably until eight thirty, without a dream or a pang of conscience to trouble him.

Charlie's plane, the direct flight from Nice by way of Barcelona and Lisbon, was two hours late into La Guardia Airport, thanks to violent thunderstorms and turbulence over the Atlantic and a long, unexplained delay on takeoff in Lisbon. So it was almost midnight when Charlie felt the solid ground of Long Island under his feet again after an absence of five days. It felt good to be home, he admitted sheepishly to himself.

After collecting his single suitcase from the baggage belt, he was one of the first in line at the customs barrier. He declared his foreign purchases, showing corroborating sales slips, and paid without a murmur the hefty duty assessed on his Piaget wristwatch. The powder boxes and the bottle of fine cognac (half empty) drew only a passing glance from the customs inspector. Then, whistling softly to himself, with suitcase in hand, Charlie began to work his way through the small crowd of relatives and friends who, even at this late hour, were waiting to welcome Charlie's fellow passengers.

On the outer fringe of the shifting gathering, Charlie spotted the ill-tempered, sour-apple face of Mean Gene Faldi.

Gene caught Charlie's eye at once and, after a small "follow me" jerk of his head, turned and headed up one of the long access corridors of the terminal, almost deserted now. Charlie gently elbowed his way free of the crowd and followed Gene at a discreet distance. Eventually, Gene's retreating back led to an exit into a distant parking lot. Charlie lost sight of Gene temporarily there, only to pick him up again as Faldi passed through the dim yellow radiance of one of the parking lot's overhead lights.

Mean Gene led him to the farthest and darkest corner of the parking lot before turning to face him and greet him by name. "Your damn plane was two hours late!" he said accusingly, as though it was Charlie's fault. "Gimme your bag and get in." He opened the rear door of a large Cadillac sedan.

Charlie could see, even in the dim light, that John Muntz was behind the wheel. And as soon

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as he climbed into the back seat after surrendering his suitcase to Gene, he knew immediately that Big Nick Muscaro had also done him the honor of meeting his plane personally. The odor of witch hazel after-shave was unmistakable.

Mean Gene Faldi climbed into the passenger seat beside John Muntz. He held the suitcase firmly between his knees. Big Nick, sitting in the shadowed corner of the back seat, said, "Well, Carlo? Any trouble?"

"Not a whisper," Charlie answered.

"Customs?"

"A breeze."

"France?"

"Everything went as smooth as grease, Nick."

"Good," said Big Nick and lapsed into silence.

John Muntz wheeled the big car out of the parking lot onto the parkway, and headed for the Midtown Tunnel. Nobody said anything more until they were through the tunnel and John Muntz had turned north. Then Big Nick said, "We're going to my place, Carlo."

Charlie felt a glow of satisfaction, but kept his voice even. "Great," he said, realizing instantly that Big Nick would never consider Charlie's errand successfully concluded without checking out the goods in Charlie's suitcase—in private. And he wouldn't let Charlie off the hook until that was done. "I always wanted to see your place, Nick," he said honestly.

"Nothing special about it. Two bedroom co-op."

Nick's two bedroom co-op was in a fancy apartment house called Waterside Arms on Riverside Drive. As they pulled up in front of the building, Big Nick said to John Muntz, "Wait here, John. You can drive Carlo home in a little while."

Charlie said, "Don't bother. I can take a taxi from here, Nick. It's one o'clock in the morning and John's probably had a big day. Besides, I won't have anything on me worth stealing when I leave here. I won't need a bodyguard."

They all knew what he meant by that. "Okay," Nick said. "Put the car away then, John. I'll need you tomorrow at ten."

John Muntz, touching himself fleetingly under the left arm, said, "You sure you won't need me *now,* boss?"

"I've got Gene. Goodnight, John."

With Gene Faldi carrying Charlie's suitcase, they ascended in one of the self-service elevators to Big Nick's apartment. Nick used his key to open the door, led them through a small foyer into the living room, turning on lights as he went. Charlie looked around, thinking that Big Nick was right, the apartment was nothing special,

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at least what he could see of it. It was rich-looking, luxuriously furnished, all the colors went together all right, but all the same, Charlie thought, it had a raffish, arty look.

Big Nick took Charlie's suitcase from Gene Faldi and swung it onto a coffee table in front of a long sofa. "Sit down, boys," he said over his shoulder. Charlie and Gene folded themselves into a couple of leather easy chairs and watched Big Nick throw back the lid of Charlie's suitcase.

The white shopping bag from the *parfumerie* in Cannes was on top. Nick took the powder boxes out of the shopping bag and lined them up on the coffee table in a row. He picked up the first one, inspected its re-glued bottom with approval, and said, "Neat job, Carlo."

For some reason, Charlie blushed. "That's the only thing I was really worried about," he said, "the glue job."

"Professional." Nick inspected the bottoms of the other three boxes. "Perfect," he pronounced. Gene Faldi looked sour.

Nick took the top off the first box. Then he brought out a slim gold penknife and slit the paper seal over the powder, first removing the powder puff that covered it. Then he tested the contents of the box just as Charlie had done in Nice . . . with moistened finger and tongue. After subjecting each of the remaining three powder boxes to the same treatment, he nodded with satisfaction, turned to Gene Faldi, and said, "We picked the right boy for the errand, Gene. The kid's done it and done it okay. I think we ought to have a drink to celebrate."

"Why not?" said Gene unenthusiastically.

Charlie said, feeling complacent, "You mean a real drink, Nick? Or Perrier and lime?"

"A real one." Big Nick was in excellent spirits. "What'll you have, boys?" He waved toward a bar table in a corner of the room.

"There's a partly full bottle of five star French cognac in my suitcase," said Charlie, "if you want to try that. It's the smoothest stuff I ever tasted. And after all, you paid for it, Nick."

"Fine," said Nick. "Get us some glasses, Gene."

Faldi got three cut-crystal old-fashioned glasses from the bar table while Nick rummaged in Charlie's suitcase for the cognac. When he found it, he half filled the glasses and handed them around. Then he sat down on the sofa facing the chairs in which Gene and Charlie were ensconced, lifted his glass in Charlie's general direction, said, "Cheers," and downed a big dollop of brandy.

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Gene and Charlie merely sipped at theirs. "Ah!" said Big Nick, smacking his lips, "it's been a long time between waterholes!"

Charlie said, "It's smooth stuff, isn't it? And it ought to be. You paid plenty for it, Nick. And something else you paid for—the wristwatch you told me to buy to run interference for the powder boxes through customs. You want it? It's in my suitcase there."

Nick took another large gulp of cognac, an insult to a liquor of such quality. When Big Nick fell off the Perrier wagon, he fell off fast. Nick said, "Keep the watch if you like it, Carlo. Consider it a little present. It's strictly peanuts compared to the million-dollar present you brought *me*."

"Okay," said Charlie. "Thanks."

"Come on, Gene, drink up!" Nick refilled his own empty glass and topped up Gene's. "You got to admit that Carlo did a first class job for us his first time out."

Half-serious, half-laughing, Charlie said, "Who wouldn't, with Guido breathing down his neck?"

Nick laughed. "Never mind Guido. That was just a gag to impress you a little." He looked at Gene Faldi. "Drink up, Gene," he urged again, "this is a celebration."

Mean Gene took a more generous sip of his cognac, his long horse face, despite the occasion, sour and acidulous, steeped in gloom.

Suddenly, with a feeling of guilt, Charlie remembered that Mean Gene's mother had died recently. In sympathy, he said, "Hey, Gene, I was sorry to hear about your mother. Did everything go all right in California?"

There was a split-second pause, then Big Nick Muscaro sputtered and snorted and burst into a laugh so hearty that he spilled some of his brandy.

Charlie threw him a startled glance. Even for Big Nick, laughter in the face of Gene's loss was a flagrant display of bad taste. Charlie looked to see how Gene was taking Nick's levity. Gene's expression was neither angry nor questioning nor hurt. Merely impassive.

Big Nick suppressed his laughter after a struggle. He looked at Charlie over his cognac glass, and said casually, "The joke's on you, Carlo. Gene's mother didn't die."

Charlie put his drink down carefully on the coffee table and looked from Nick to Gene and back again. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Gene Faldi answered him. "The bit about my mother dying was just an excuse Nick and I cooked up so's you could take my place on the Nice trip, Char-

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lie. My mother's still alive and healthy. She lives in Hoboken."

"What!" Charlie's expression was more bewildered than anything else.

"Sure," Nick confirmed. "See, Carlo, we got a new supplier now. In Miami. Handier and cheaper than the French refiners in Marseilles. So your trip to France was our last pickup over there."

"Last pickup? What's that got to do with it?" Charlie turned to Mean Gene Faldi. "Why didn't you make the pickup yourself? Why con me into taking your place?"

Mean Gene glanced at Nick Muscaro and said, "You gonna tell him, boss?"

"Long as it's all over and he's home free, why not?" Nick took a fortifying gulp of brandy. "The thing is, Carlo, the big thing to remember, is that we got a million dollars' worth of prime smack and it didn't cost us a red cent except your expenses."

Charlie was more bewildered than ever. "I don't get it," he said, frowning. "I turned over a money belt full of cash to Dr. DuBois for that stuff." He nodded toward the powder boxes. "So what do you mean we got it for free?"

Nick gave him a gully grin. "That was funny money in your money belt, Carlo. Counterfeit."

"Oh," said Charlie in a whisper. Slowly he reached for his brandy glass and took a larger swallow this time. He was quiet for a minute after that, while Big Nick and Gene Faldi watched him with amusement, expecting a violent reaction to their bombshell.

It didn't come. Charlie merely said, very softly, "So I was to be the patsy if the French doctor happened to notice the money was funny?" Charlie felt again that small streak of coldness slide up his back at the thought of what could easily have happened to him in the naughty city of Nice.

Nick said, "You weren't running much of a risk, Carlo. That French doctor wouldn't know a counterfeit hundred dollar bill if it came up and bit him. He's just a go-between, Carlo. A dumb doctor. Would *you* be able to tell a fake hundred *franc* note from a good one?"

"Maybe not," said Charlie, "but all the same . . ."

"So forget it, all right?"

"If anything *had* gone haywire in France, you didn't want to risk Gene's neck, is that it?"

Nick shrugged his massive shoulders. "Sure. Why not? Gene's been with me a long time, Carlo. Understand? You're new, you're younger, you're . . ."

"More expendable?"

"Right. But everything worked out okay, didn't it? So what happens now? You get a

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very nice cut of the deal. You get a little promotion in the organization. And you won't be so expendable from now on."

Nick gave Charlie the big grin again.

Charlie sat for a moment sipping his drink. Then, with a reluctant smile, he said, "You really set me up pretty, didn't you? I feel like a fool. But the way things went, I guess it's okay."

"Good," said Big Nick. Mean Gene's facial muscles twitched in what passed with him for a smile. "Give Gene back his passport," Nick ordered, "and we'll all have another snort."

"No more booze for me," Charlie protested. "I'm pooped. I'm going home and sleep for a week. Can I call a taxi, Nick?"

"Phone's in the dinette," said Nick fuzzily. He waved a hand at a door at the far end of the living room.

Charlie got out of his chair, handed Mean Gene back his passport, went to the telephone in the dinette, and called a cab. "Be here in ten minutes," he said when he returned to the living room. He closed his suitcase, lifted it from the sofa, and turned toward the door. "I'll leave the bottle of cognac, what's left of it," he said.

"Damn right," said Big Nick thickly. "I paid for it didn't I?"

Charlie laughed. "Yeah. And you're drinking most of it, too," he said. "Goodnight."

Charlie left them.

A minute later, the elevator deposited him in the lobby of the Riverside Arms. The lobby was deserted, except for three men who seemed on the point of entering the elevator Charlie had just left. One of the men, older than his companions, had gray in his hair and wore a certain air of authority.

Charlie said to him, "Apartment 810, Jud. The door's unlocked, so you can walk right in. And I've got everything we need on tape."

The older man nodded. "Are they likely to give us trouble?"

Charlie shook his head. "They're both half-stoned on French brandy. There's twenty ounces of uncut angel dust on a table in plain sight. And there's no way they're expecting a visit tonight from their friendly neighborhood Drug Enforcement Administration."

The graying man nodded again and led his companions into the elevator.

Agent Charlie Bell, suffering from jet lag, fell asleep in the taxi on his way home.

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FICTION

The Irreverent Reverend Abbot

by Ron Butler



Yumiko, on the eve of her eighty-third birthday, expressed a wish to do something different by way of celebration. "At my age," our housekeeper-nanny cackled, "waiting could be fatal."

An idea germinated. "Why," I offered, "don't you come with me when I go to the office in the morning? I'll skim through the paperwork, then we'll go have a super lunch—anywhere you'd like." I turned to my wife. "In fact, Noriko, let's all go."

"Oh, Sam," she said, smiling, "that is so considerate of you, but I must take the twins to the doctor for their checkup. Do you want to take the car? I can go by taxi."

"Never!" I said gallantly. "Yumiko and I will take a cab."

"A small blessing," Yumiko chuckled. Noriko slewed toward a window, hiding her expression.

"It's all set, then," I said, superficially indifferent to the continued—and unjust—

Illustration by Ray Lago

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references to my difficulties in adjusting to what I thought of as maniacal Japanese driving habits.

Not much later, Okayama Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki called to find out what his daughter and grandsons were up to, and I asked if he'd like to join the luncheon party. He said he would, and I went upstairs to consult—in private—my journal of local restaurants, cached at the bottom of a desk drawer beneath stacks of old tax papers and paid bills to prevent remarks about my fondness for cuisine, Japanese or otherwise.

For Yumiko, I decided, a four-star rating by Sam Brent was in order: good food, pleasing atmosphere, and affordable prices.

Walking anywhere with Yumiko can be a social event, and our stroll to the taxi stand the next morning was no exception. I don't think there was

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another woman her age in our district she didn't know, and each encounter triggered an elaborate, lingering bow and a melodious good morning. *"O-hayo gozaimasu,"* she stopped to say to a friend in front of the dairy. And others by the laundry, the tobacconist, and the stationer. *"O-hayo gozaimasu,"* the old ladies sang back, each, to me, a living tome of history, faces wrinkled with the dry runnels of time. If anyone considered that we were an odd-looking pair—one stooped and diminutive, the other tall and flaming-haired—no one allowed it to show, and I bent my back as cheerfully as the next person.

We crossed the thoroughfare and luck brought us a taxi almost immediately. *"Doko e iki-taika?"* the cabbie asked, craning his neck as we piled into the back seat.

I gave him the address, sat back, and prepared to enjoy what promised to be an exceptionally mild, clear day of early summer. Yumiko leaned forward, prepared to enjoy what promised to be an informative conversation about the high cost of living and the slovenly attitudes of the younger generation. *"Hai, hai, so desu,"* the driver squeezed in between Yumiko's observations, and by the fiftieth "Yeah, yeah, that's right," we pulled up at the traffic light across from my office building.

The signals changed color, and a woman's taped voice chimed from hidden speakers: "Please cross carefully, thank you so much." As we stepped onto the opposite curb, the lilting voice advised pedestrians to please wait. Was this the same voice, I wondered, that reminded car drivers to buckle up, or that something in the electric oven was ready to take out?

"You are daydreaming again," Yumiko chided.

"Only ruminating on technological progress," I said, striding to the glass doors that—on all previous occasions—opened automatically. This time they didn't. I avoided collision by a centimeter, and Yumiko slowly and loudly read the placard taped to the doors: "Temporarily out of order. Please push."

She humphed, I pushed. The elevator functioned as smoothly as ever, but with a new fillip—that same oh-so-sweet taped voice, announcing, this time, floors.

It was Yumiko's first visit to my computer hardware office, but she barged in ahead of me and made straight for one of her favorite people, Masahige Goto, my head clerk. "Have you met a woman suitable for marriage yet?" she said, sweeping her

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eyes over the rest of the staff. "You seem thin to me—not eating well, I suppose, and probably not paid enough by your boss. That shirt is a disgrace. A good wife would iron it properly. Well, what do you have to say?"

"Good morning, Yumiko-san." What else *could* Goto say? Yumiko was a paradigm of individual freedom, feeling, I suppose, that one whose life has spanned so many decades is entitled to ignore many of the conventions. I doubt if she had ever heard of women's rights, and if she had, she might have snorted and said human common sense would be a better goal; she smoked a pipe and enjoyed a few thimblefuls of sake on occasion, but she was as tender and loving with children as she was caustic and impatient with those she saw as pompous or selfish. I admit there were times when she got under my skin, embarrassing and frustrating me, but I had come to agree with Noriko that Yumiko's instincts were usually right.

Now, as she whirled about, long charcoal gray skirt churning at the tops of her ankle-high black shoes, I smiled at Goto and followed as she opened the door to my office. She sneezed, coughed, and went to the window. "Musty!" she snapped, yanking the Venetian blinds up with a dust-scattering clatter. The window was jerked open. "Better," she claimed. "Does anyone ever clean in here? I doubt it."

When Miss Namba entered diffidently, bearing the morning mail, Yumiko took a first-sight liking to her and went to show her how my morning green tea should be prepared. Goto pulled a chair up to my desk and we were going over the day's agenda when a bird flew through the window, fluttering frantically against the walls and ceiling.

"It's a sparrow!" I said, leaping to my feet.

The bird zoomed into the outer offices.

"Stay calm!" I shouted into a chorus of exclamations and laughter.

Everyone offered a solution: open all the windows, open the door to the corridor, trap it in the supply room, shoo it out with rolled-up newspaper.

The sparrow found a high wall shelf, perched, preened, and chirruped. We huddled, mulled over various tactics, and settled on Yumiko's strategy: go back to work and let the bird be until it decided which open window looked best.

"It is an omen," Yumiko asserted. "Something will happen today."

Older people sometimes believe things like that, don't they? We returned to my office,

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Goto thumbed through his ledgers, and Inspector Ueki sauntered in through the outer door, calling out hearty greetings. The sparrow soared again, buzzing the inspector's head, bumping against the blinds, and finally making its exit.

The inspector brushed feathers off one of the black vinyl sofas by my desk and took a seat. "How you manage a successful business sometimes escapes me, Sam."

"Why I ask you to lunch sometimes escapes me, too," I rejoined.

"Lunch?" Goto said, looking up from his books.

I felt it coming. "Yeah. Today's Yumiko's birthday. Want to go?"

His reply was a grin and a sharp pop of a sleeve garter. I mentally kissed my daily personal budget farewell and finished the work, resigned to the fact that generosity is incurable.

The automatic door in the lobby was still out of order as we made our egress into mellow sunshine.

"A light summer dish?" I said hopefully. Light translates as inexpensive.

"I want *wheeskey mizuwari,*" Yumiko demanded, holding a menu up close to her spectacles.

A highball? At her age? "I have never had *wheeskey mizuwari,*" she said, leaving no room for argument.

Yumiko got her highball. And filet mignon (rare), insisting that we would be the rudest of clodpates if we declined to enjoy her birthday with the best of foods. Then, when we were finished, she fished a five-thousand-yen bill from a straw billfold. "In honor of Yumiko's birthday," she announced, "Yumiko will pay."

I didn't have the heart to tell her, so, after profuse thanks, I took her offering to the cashier, added another forty thousand yen, and gave Yumiko her "change," a crisp thousand yen bill.

"It does not feel right," she complained, holding it up to the light, then slapping it down in front of the inspector. "You, Toshihiko Ueki, are supposed to be a policeman. Do something about this."

I smothered a grin, sure that the highball was playing games with Yumiko's judgment.

Ueki wasn't smiling. "She is right, Sam. This is counterfeit. Further," he added, getting up, "it is the best I have ever seen. Shall we go speak to the management?"

Yumiko nodded in satisfaction. "I was certain that sparrow came to bring us a message."

Goto was casting wistful looks

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at the remainder of Yumiko's drink.

Oh! Oh, my! the cashier said, eyes roving from face to face as the manager stood by solemnly. She did remember, yes. A man paid for his meal with seven one-thousand-yen bills. All new, she remembered, because they were so clean, so crisp. Yes, some are still here. Must you keep them? Oh!

Could this most helpful citizen aid the police with a description? the inspector asked.

Yes. Yes, that is easy. The man looked like a frog.

A frog? Ueki's pen paused over his notebook.

Hai. In fact. His eyes bulged, his mouth did not look like it could smile, and, under his chin, a sagging pouch of pale skin wobbled when he spoke. And, his legs were bowed and very strong to look at, but his arms . . .

"What," Ueki said, sighing, "did you notice about his arms?"

Short, the cashier said, very short—the shortest she had ever seen on a person.

"Well," I said, "I can hardly wait for you to pass that description along to your men. Ready to resume work, Goto-san? I've got to get Yumiko home, then I'll be back."

Yumiko stamped her foot—hard. "I want to go to police headquarters. I found the counterfeit! I am old and it is my birthday."

Ueki and I both knew that she was merely warming up, that denial of her request would boost her to new heights of vociferous objection.

"What harm can it do, Sam?" Ueki smiled. "Police work is so boring usually that Yumiko-san may regret wasting the time. Shall all of us go—for a few minutes?"

Goto hesitated under the awninged entrance to the Flower Restaurant. "I don't know. There is much work to do, and every time I go with the two of you . . . "

"Nonsense!" I said with an air of worldly wisdom. "This is just going to be a matter of time and footwork that won't even involve us. Right, Toshihiko?"

The inspector waved a taxi to the curb. *"Tahika."*

Sure.

I was familiar enough with Okayama Police Headquarters—and many of the men—to give Yumiko a tour. Communications and Fingerprinting she deemed uninteresting, but she thoroughly enjoyed the photography room, where suspected miscreants took turns in front of the camera.

After our look-around, we met Goto at the booking desk where he was passing the time with a chum from school days,

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then moved on to Inspector Ueki's office.

"Anything more on the counterfeit money?" I asked.

"Some preliminary information," he said, poking at an ashtray with his cigarette. "Except for the quality of the paper and the lack of authenticating watermarks, the bill Yumiko discovered is a perfect reproduction —much superior to anything of its kind I have seen before. Yet, it does not seem logical."

I leaned against a filing cabinet. "Making perfect copies seems like a good idea if counterfeiting is the name of the game."

Yumiko, almost lost in the depths of the sofa cushions, chuckled. "Only a dolt would bother to make thousand-yen bills."

The inspector smiled at her. "Indeed, Yumiko-san. If I were a criminal, and if I were capable of such excellent quality, I would turn out the highest possible denomination, ten-thousand-yen notes."

"*Hai,*" Goto contributed. "With inflation so high, the counterfeiter would face rising costs in basic materials—like paper, ink, and printing equipment."

"Maybe the guy's just in it for aesthetic satisfaction?" I was sorry I said it before the last word was out and was thankful for the ringing of the telephone. Inspector Ueki answered, spoke a few pleasantries, and then frowned. "Do nothing! Say no more! I am leaving now." He slammed down the receiver. "That was Noriko, Sam, and we must rush to your home!"

"What? The boys!"

"No," he said as we dashed down the corridor, leaving a protesting Yumiko behind with Goto. "There are two strangers at your house who have a large amount of currency with them." He activated the lights and siren while I was still closing my door. "Noriko says that one of them is an ugly man who resembles a frog."

"Floor it!" I urged.

In retrospect, I can't blame the inspector for not giving Noriko a chance to tell him the strangers were foreigners who didn't speak Japanese, or that one of them bore a note to me from the American embassy in Tokyo (she couldn't have read it anyway). With Noriko alone with Kenji and Jotaro, our haste and her anxiety can be justified (who could have anticipated the double involvement of look-alikes *and* Japanese currency, some already known to be bogus?).

In any case, I thought that the Reverend Otis H. Vomer, recently arrived from the United States, was spectacular in appearance. His body, attired in

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an amphibian-green suit, was oddly foreshortened, rotundly squat with a neckless head protruding from a pink shirt collar. The eyes, embedded in puffy lids, did, in fact, seem to jut outward, and the froglike effect was enhanced by two pronounced bosses above each pale brow. The skin beneath his chin, a pasty white, was tucked in sharply for some distance, then swelled out above his Adam's apple.

Vomer, who appeared to be blissfully unaware of his effect on others, possessed another physical characteristic that I found incongruous with the rest of him: when he spoke, he did not croak but uttered mellifluous sonorities, cadenced and rounded with the midwestern accent for which the best-known media announcers and newscasters are known. That, I reflected while listening to him, was appropriate, for Vomer's gospel was disseminated by radio, which (he said) brought the grace of his theological opinions to listeners by the millions.

The other stranger in our house was Miss Crystal Galli, introduced as the Reverend Mr. Vomer's secretary; she sat across from him with a rapt look, stenographer's pad ready to capture (I supposed) any pearls worthy of preservation for his flock. It was difficult in the extreme for me not to stare at her. She wore a stiff black bombazine jacket, puce blouse, and beige skirt of sharp-fold pleats. Above the lacy cream collar of the blouse, a long, sinewy neck led to an almond-shaped face, decorated in front with designer sunglasses and on top by one of those fads in hair styling which is supposed to produce a head of modishly tight curls, but which, in Miss Crystal Galli's case, brought to mind Medusa's wriggling coiffure.

Trying to divide my attention equally between the two spectacles, I half-listened as Reverend Vomer explained about his presence and the money, which was laid out in neat piles on the family room floor in front of his cushion, on which he reposed benignly, unblinking eyes staring at a point somewhere between Inspector Ueki and me.

"So," Vomer said in his rich tones, "I checked in with the embassy and was told by one of the officers that you have lived here for many years." His lips twitched in what might have been a smile. "He provided us with these cards." Vomer held out one of them; English on one side, Japanese on the other, it gave instructions for taxi drivers to find our house.

Did one of the curls on Miss Galli's head move? "Oh, yes, I know some of the embassy people, so I can see why they might

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suggest that you look me up. You, ah, you're here to do . . . to make a study of religious belief systems in Japan?"

"More or less," Vomer replied. "I am touring a large part of the Orient, and Japan is our first stop."

"I see." I didn't, really, so mesmerized by his visage and voice that I was having trouble articulating my thoughts.

Inspector Ueki marched into the breach of my confusion. "I do not question how you came to Mr. Brent's house, Vomer-san, and I do regret that we arrived here so precipitately, although I can assure you that there was reason. Now," he rapped his pen against an open notebook, "please tell me once more how you came to be in possession of these thousand-yen bills."

"There was a man at this city's railroad station—a filthy, noisy place, I must say—who literally shoved the money into my hands."

Ueki's pen drummed a little tattoo. "You are saying the counterfeit money was a gift?"

The cleric in green raised his head, and thus his eyes, to the ceiling. "Yes, and I did not question it. Although I have little personal use for it, money often flows my way, and when we arrived here, I asked Miss Galli to count it so we could convert it to dollars."

The top of Inspector Ueki's pen rotated in what I recognized as an impatient doodling configuration. "Further, you state that you were not the only recipient of this—this bogus largesse?"

"So I have said." Reverend Vomer's eyes returned to a horizontal plane.

I watched a fly crawl across the outside of a window screen. Would Vomer's tongue, quick as lightning, flick out . . . ?

"What," the inspector asked, "did this person look like?"

"Oh," Vomer said, losing himself momentarily in deep reflection, "it's hard to be specific. He was Japanese, of course. A man about my age, I should guess. And handsome. Quite handsome, wouldn't you agree, Miss Galli?"

I dug my nails into my palm. "You need to use the telephone, don't you, Toshihiko? Let me show you where it is."

I got out of there, zipped through the kitchen and out the back door, propping myself against the concrete wall separating our house from our nearest neighbor.

Inspector Ueki was a second or two behind me. "Sam, before you say anything, I will remind you of two things. One, counterfeiting is a serious criminal offense. Second, it is not polite to judge a person by appearances."

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"Ribbit!" I croaked.

"Handsome!" he guffawed.

We got it out of our systems. Ueki went to the telephone, I climbed the stairs to see how Noriko was doing with the boys. They were napping; she was frowning. "They have brought their luggage, Sam, and I think they plan to stay here for some time."

The logistics weren't that difficult. "Okay, Noriko. We can put Vomer in this room, Miss Galli in with Yumiko, and the twins can sleep with us. All right?"

She continued to fret. "It is our duty to be hospitable, but they do make me nervous. That man—Vomer-san—seems to disapprove of everything he sees."

Brainstorm. "Look, there's no reason why you shouldn't take the boys and go spend a night or two with your mother. That way, you won't have to put up with them."

She declined. "No, I will not leave you to face them alone."

I was giving her an appreciative hug when Inspector Ueki tapped at the sliding door and came in. "Vomer was telling the truth about counterfeit money being given away in large amounts," he said.

"Yeah?"

Ueki nodded. "My men have reports from Okayama Station, from shoppers in several downtown department stores, and from people in the park. A few of the recipients were suspicious and took the bills to banks, where they were confirmed as spurious."

"You've got a nut on your hands, Toshihiko."

"I have to agree. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to return to headquarters."

Soon after the inspector's cruiser pulled out of the gravel lane and crossed the bridge, a taxi drew up and disgorged Yumiko and Goto. Goto saw me at the window, grinned, waved, and headed for the entranceway, face as red as a beet.

The Reverend Otis H. Vomer's eyes turned smoky with indignation as Goto drank cup after cup of hot green tea. Miss Crystal Galli's expression was that of someone standing downwind of a stockyard on a summer day, and this, at least, was understandable: Goto did smell a tad like a brewery, his suit still giving off fumes from a spilled drink.

"Does this happen often?" the media cleric huffed, shifting about on the cushion like a frog on a waterlily.

Though Goto didn't understand English beyond the basic greetings, he was not falling-down drunk, and he did recognize the disapprobation in

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Vomer's tone. "I am sorry," he said, "if I have caused offense. Yumiko and I drank a little more after we learned all was well here."

There were a dozen ways—all honest—that I could have replied: Goto's face was crimson because even a moderate amount of alcohol puts a blush on the clear Japanese complexion; he drank that day only because Yumiko wanted to, putting friendship considerably above the chores at the office. Walking into my home, he could have put up a pretense of total sobriety, except there was no reason for it. And, finally, I knew that Goto, with the snap of a mental finger, could be back on-line, willing to do anything but drive a car.

"He doesn't need an excuse," I said lightly. "An old friend, Yumiko-san, asked him to join her for a couple of drinks."

"Yumiko?" the Reverend Mr. Vomer said, trilling incredulity. "The elderly person who takes care of your children —those dear innocents? She drinks, too? Are you taking this down, Miss Galli?"

Miss Galli's pen rustled an answer across the pad.

I felt my temper indicator pushing into the red. Noriko checked it with a glance. "Ask them, Sam, what they would like for me to prepare for the evening meal."

"Since when," I demanded, "do uninvited guests select the menu?"

Noriko modulated her voice to a precise degree of gentle reproof. "Be understanding, Sam. Please."

I capitulated. "Miss Galli," I said in English, "would you and Reverend Vomer care for a fish dinner?"

"Yes," Vomer answered for her, "fish will be satisfactory for both of us."

I switched back to Japanese. "Sashimi should hit the spot, my love, and you might add some of that pickled octopus if we have any left."

"Hai," she said, unaware that some people allow preconceived notions about certain foods — such as raw fish—to spoil their appetites.

Goto took a raincheck on the meal and left to catch a cab back to the office. "There is much work that remains to be done," he claimed.

I knew better, and envied his convenient escape.

Inspector Ueki called from his home at nine o'clock, reporting that there were no leads on the identity of the counterfeiter.

"Gosh, I'm sorry to hear that. Listen, why don't you and Hanako stop by? There's plenty of sashimi left, and I was thinking of opening a bottle of that scotch

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you like so much."

Ueki's laugh rattled my eardrums. "You seem unusually keen on having company this evening, Sam."

"Yeah, okay," I admitted, "they are driving me crazy here. Could you come over? Just for a little while?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," the inspector said. "Give us a half hour."

I replaced the receiver thankfully and tiptoed up the stairs to check on Yumiko. She was snoozing away on her pallet, tired, I imagined, from a wild day out on the town (steak and two highballs). Then, screwing up my nerve, I rejoined Noriko and our guests in the family room.

Reverend Vomer consumed the last of a cheese sandwich, substituted—at his request—for the sashimi, and Inspector Ueki and Hanako came in as Miss Galli was putting aside her cup of instant corn soup.

Noriko and her mother took the dishes to the kitchen while Ueki and I asked if there was anything we could tell the media minister about Japan that would be helpful. He assured us that his guidebook appeared to be adequate.

Crystal Galli stood up. "I think I would enjoy a bath, if your house has one."

Noriko had already heated the water, and I asked her to show Miss Galli the way. Soon, two voices mingled in the hallway, one soft and patient, the other shrill with exasperation.

"Sorry," I said, stepping into the corridor, "I forgot that Noriko's English is limited. She's telling you that the towels are folded on a shelf in there" (I pointed) "and that the buckets and ladles are on the tiles in the bath."

That required more explanation; Miss Galli was not pleased to learn that she was expected to wash *before* she lowered herself into the tub. "What a stupid custom," she said. Snout in the air, she shut the outer door.

Reverend Vomer, hands folded across his stomach, looked up as I returned to the family room. "Don't you miss civilization, Mr. Brent?"

I was working on a definition for civilized behavior when a scream—sustained and warbling—sent me running to the bath. The ululation shot up several notches in pitch as I slid back the frosted glass door.

The inspector hurried in next to me. Then Noriko. And her mother. Miss Crystal Galli, a cooked-lobster red from the neck down, sat with her back to us, hugging herself. Noriko doused her with the contents of a plastic bucket, then refilled it with cold tap water as the inspector and I made our way through the

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kitchen and out to the concrete wall for the second time that day, paying no attention to the Reverend Otis H. Vomer's demands to know what was happening.

The way I saw it (and Ueki agreed), Miss Galli decided to cheat in the bath. Instead of removing the insulated cover and washing while she let some of the steam escape, she plopped herself smack down in the tub, unaware that Japanese bath water is heated to very high temperatures because a whole family may soak in one drawing of water.

I'd done it once myself, a night Noriko and the neighbors still discuss with some amusement, so I could almost sympathize.

We went inside again and found Reverend Vomer pacing the family room floor, shaking his head. "I think, Mr. Brent, that we may shorten our stay here."

"Oh," I said, not looking at the inspector.

"Yes," Vomer continued, "as soon as I can find a proper subject for an interview, I will arrange our departure."

"Whom do you want to talk to?" I asked.

Vomer stood with his back to a calligraphy wall scroll. "To someone who passes for a man of the cloth in this part of the world."

Passes for? "What do you mean?"

"To be frank, Mr. Brent, I want to visit someone with knowledge of the pagan religions so that my followers can benefit from the contrast."

I glanced at the inspector from the corner of an eye and saw that slight twisting of the lips that signals, in his case, a wicked form of premeditated vengeance. "Perhaps Vomer-san would enjoy a session with the Reverend Abbot."

Yeah! Although I'd spent no more than two or three hours in the Reverend Abbot's presence, I knew him for a rara avis—one of Japan's most respected masters of a unique form of zen. He was what a whole generation of my countrymen might have called a mind-blower.

"Right!" I said enthusiastically. "The Reverend Abbot is a Buddhist. That suit you?"

"Denomination," said the cleric, "does not matter, so long as it is beyond the pale of the True Way."

True Way, I mused. Vomer's Way, in short. "Can you arrange it, Toshihiko?"

"Yes," the inspector said. "I believe it is important that Vomer-san and the Reverend Abbot meet."

I apologized to Miss Galli when she made an indignant exit from the bath. She glared,

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retrieved her notebook, and permitted Noriko to show her to her room.

Ueki and I split a beer and called it a night. The next day, I hoped, would bring a conclusion to Reverend Vomer's visit.

After the night, dawn as usual. Shave, dress, and breakfast—before our company awakened. Hold the fort, I said to Noriko, promising to collect Reverend Vomer and Miss Galli as soon as Inspector Ueki worked out the details for a trip to the Reverend Abbot's monastery. She said nothing, but there was a plea in her look: Hurry, please, and get them out of here before anything else goes wrong. A kiss for Noriko and the boys, out the door to the car.

Goto was at the office when I showed up, straw broom in hand, trying to eject a sparrow. The same one? Another omen? Stuff! Exit the sparrow, enter the paperwork.

At eleven, I put my signets back in the top drawer, grinned at the heap of profitable new contracts, and dialed Inspector Ueki's number.

There was more bogus money being reported from all over Okayama, he said. The bankers were upset, the mayor angry, and the reporters yammering for official comment.

Not the time to ask about how soon we could get Vomer and Crystal Galli to see the Reverend Abbot. "I'm going to get a haircut," I said. "I'll stop by your office when I'm through. Okay?"

"Get those reporters out of here!" Ueki growled in an aside. Then, "See you later, Sam." He hung up, and I left for my trim. The automatic doors were on the fritz again, but the dulcet-voiced traffic light directed me safely across the intersection.

The barbershop looked right—inexpensive. I pushed aside the portiere and strode in. Not too much different from similar establishments in the States: three elevated seats upholstered in leather, facing wash basins under a wall-length mirror; bottles of shampoo and tonic, shaving mugs, brushes, combs, and cologne; straight-backed chairs with tubular metal armrests; tables piled with magazines; a sand-filled ashtray.

One of the two women barbers, bowing and smiling, escorted me to my place, cranked the chair down until she could see the top of my head, draped me in a protective apron, and asked what I wanted.

"Everything but a shave," I said, deciding to splurge. The shampoo was great, the scalp massage fantastic. I dozed, mumbling replies to the bar-

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ber's questions.

"I am finished," I heard her saying as she pulled the protective cloth away. I opened my eyes, looked into the mirror, failed for an instant to recognize the nearly bald reflection, shot to my feet, and clapped hands to my ruined dome.

"What . . . ? What!"

She backed off a pace. "I asked you several times if you wanted it shorter, and each time you said that you did. That is as short as I could get it without using a razor."

My God! I thought frantically. I can't walk around looking like a hardboiled egg with blue eyes!

A man came out of a back room. "I am the proprietor. Is anything wrong?"

"Well," I said, scratching at the stubble, "this is a little short, don't you think?"

"No charge, no charge," he said amiably. "On the contrary, I want all of my customers to be happy. Every one. Oh, yes. Please take this as a token of my regret." He pressed a wad of bills into my hands.

Numb, sickened, I slunk out into the daylight, wondering if I could make my way back to the office through dark alleys. Then I looked at the bills I was holding. All thousand-yen notes. And thought of the man who gave them to me—a man with protuberant eyes, bowed legs, and odd, stumpy arms.

I ran to a public telephone and called the inspector.

"Stay where you are!" he said after I blurted out my story and gave directions. "I am on my way!"

As I waited for the inspector, I felt the burning stares of passersby. I fidgeted, searched through my pockets, found another ten-yen coin, and called home. Talking to Noriko would help. Maybe I could prepare her—gently—for my radically altered looks. Anything to pass the time until Ueki arrived.

"Sam!" she said testily, as soon as I said hello, "where are you? I called the office a few minutes ago and you were out." I repeated the directions: not far from the post office, across the street from a barbershop on the main road leading to the Willow District. Within sight of my office building.

"Remain where you are!" I was ordered once again. She hung up.

"Hey!" I protested, uselessly. No more coins! I bent low in imaginary conversation, then stepped to the curb and waved urgently as a squad car turned the corner.

"My, my!" the inspector grinned as I yanked the door open and slid in next to him. "I hope you don't catch pneumonia."

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"The barbershop," I said in a voice that was meant to be gruff but came out a squeak, "is right over there."

Another cruiser came up behind us. Ueki crossed the street with a uniformed officer on each side, and I brought up the rear. The man who had given me the phony yen was wiping lather from a straight razor as he shaved a customer. "Yes?" he said pleasantly. The women barbers were nowhere in sight.

I sensed the hesitation on the inspector's part. If he made a move toward the barber, the razor might edge down to a throat, turning this into a hostage situation.

Ueki clasped his hands behind his back, smiling casually. "I am Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki. Do you have a few minutes you can spare to talk to me—somewhere in private?"

"How nice of you to come," the proprietor said, resuming his task of slicing whiskers from the customer's chin. "My name is Eiichi Murakami, and you, naturally, are here to stop my charitable works." He nodded to the other two officers, and to me. "No, please do not come any closer."

The man in the barber chair opened his eyes, then his mouth, and froze. The gleaming razor was poised beneath the angle of his jaw.

"Murakami-san," the inspector said easily, "as of this moment, I am here to discuss counterfeiting. However, if you do not move away from that chair at the count of three, you will be charged with . . . "

"Escape!" Murakami shouted, flinging the razor down and bounding toward the back room.

Ueki and the two officers disappeared behind a bead curtain in close pursuit; I slipped on a blob of lather and fell against one of the empty chairs, slamming my eye into an armrest. By the time I picked myself up, I saw Murakami flash by the front window. I ran out and saw the three cops rounding the corner from an alley exit.

Murakami, legs pumping, spotted a cluster of people standing by a residence, stopped short, and leaped for the vehicle parked by the entrance—a long, wagon-style vehicle with a pagoda top of polished blond wood.

A hearse!

"Stop!" Ueki ordered.

But Murakami was behind the wheel. With a grinding of gears, he pulled out directly in front of a taxi, which swerved sharply and came to rest against a traffic sign with a tinkling of glass and the chink of broken chrome.

We watched helplessly as the wheeled pagoda sped off into the mazes of the downtown business district. When I turned around, the Reverend Otis H.

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Vomer, Miss Crystal Galli, and Yumiko were climbing out of the battered cab.

I felt the beginnings of what threatened to be a severe headache.

The mourners gathered outside the deceased's home were furious, venting their outrage on Inspector Ueki and his men. The casket, at least, remained in the house.

Ueki left his men to bear the brunt of the verbal assault and went to his car, busying himself with the radio. Reverend Vomer was chattering away nonstop, and Miss Crystal Galli stood aloofly on the sidewalk, brushing dust from bombazine and pleats, the snaked coils of her hairdo seeming even tighter in the excitement.

When I found a gap in Vomer's rapid-fire queries, I shot off one of my own to Yumiko: "How come Noriko sent you here with these two?"

"Them!" she said with a wry face. "They turned up their noses at the breakfast I fixed, were angry because we do not speak their language, and looked at everything in the house as if it were dirt. Noriko wanted them out, and here we are. But," she added, displaying a gold front tooth as she grinned, "I cannot be displeased after what I have just seen."

"What's that?" I said, watching the two cops bow and scrape a retreat to their cruiser.

"Your head!" Yumiko burst out. "When Noriko sees that . . . "

That was something to contemplate, but Inspector Ueki was gesturing from his car window and I hurried to him. "Now what?"

"Every available unit is looking for Murakami, but he seems to have found concealment somewhere."

"That's funny, Toshihiko. There Murakami is, and all the cops in Okayama can't find him in a rolling pagoda. You'd think he'd stand out like . . . "

" . . . the skin on your scalp?" Ueki said sourly. "I think I will go to Murakami's home. If he is not there, there may be family members I can question."

Behind me, I heard the Reverend Otis H. Vomer pontificating to Miss Galli on the wild, heathenish behavior of the Japanese. "Can I go with you? Please!"

Ueki's frown moderated. "What will you do with Vomer-san and that woman?"

"Toshihiko, isn't there an all-day movie house somewhere around here?"

"Hai, and that is a marvelous idea. One of today's features, if I recall the advertisement correctly, is a musical—*Six Trumpets."*

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I passed sufficient funds to Yumiko and told her Ueki and I would be back for them in a short time, then I informed Vomer and Miss Galli that they would have to accompany Yumiko—and to enjoy the picture.

Ueki turned on the siren at the same time Vomer started to pelt my departing back with objections.

"My husband is guilty," Mrs. Murakami said, a verdict supported by her two sisters, the women who worked as Murakami's assistant barbers. "But," she continued as the sisters kept up their nods of unanimity, "he also is crazy. Shoot him!"

Whatever happened to old fashioned family loyalty? I wondered. If anyone deserved shooting, it was the barber who skinned my head. I stared at her, but she refused to meet my eyes.

"Why should I shoot him?" the inspector asked, for all intents serious.

"Come," Mrs. Murakami beckoned. She took us down a long, dark corridor to a room at the rear of the house, sliding open the *shoji*. Behind the door of paper panels, equipment was stored everywhere.

"This," Mrs. Murakami said, "is where he makes the money. The offset printing press you are looking at cost thirty million yen." She put her hands on her waist and thrust her elbows out at defiant right angles. "For that investment, which places us in debt for life, we have discovered that the idiot is making thousand-yen bills—he says anything higher would be greedy—and those he gives away except for a few he said he spent on a good lunch!"

Inspector Ueki sighed. "Do you mean that you have not known about his illegal activities for long?"

"The blockhead has worked in secret," the barber's wife said, "deceiving all of us until earlier today, when he actually boasted about his accomplishments during the past two days. My sisters and I were discussing what to do when you arrived."

"I have a feeling," Ueki said, plucking notebook from pocket, "that adequate explanation is going to require slightly more time."

Eiichi Murakami, to believe his wife, was one of those people whose whimsies pluck at them until their hold on reality is secured by the slenderest of threads.

As a younger man (his wife said), the barber wavered between an idealized form of communism and socialism, maintaining that *someone* had to stand up for the poor, the un-

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fortunate, the downtrodden. As the years went by, he came to the conclusion that money was not the root of all evil but the source of all cures, and the only problem was in obtaining enough of it and distributing it where it was needed—to the man on the street.

On a slow day, when he found himself reading his own barbershop magazines, he came across an article on offset printing and its special techniques, such as platemaking from photographic films.

"With a press," he informed his wife and her sisters, "I can bring in extra funds by reproducing paintings and scrolls."

"But," his wife protested, "you must have permission to reproduce the work of others, and the materials you need to do it will cost more than you can ever earn."

"It must be the law of each person ennobled by concern," he reasoned, "to help the next person, and I must do charitable deeds with the additional income I intend to bring in."

Arguments escalated to quarrels, and Murakami soon positioned himself above such petty concerns as family opinion. With the savings of a lifetime, bolstered by a hefty loan, he was able to purchase secondhand equipment, and devoted all of his hours at home to acquiring new skills. In time, he was turning out high-quality duplicates of prints purchased at department stores, but (said his spouse) no one suspected until too late that he had come to regard paper money as *objets d'art*.

"Are you sure you will not have to shoot him?" Mrs. Murakami asked as we prepared to leave.

"I hope not," the inspector said somewhat shortly, "but all of your husband's counterfeiting equipment is going to be confiscated, and he most certainly will have to pay for his crime."

Someone, I thought as we returned to Ueki's cruiser, always gets hurt, even in the crimes that don't spill blood. Murakami's family was going to suffer, regardless of the outcome.

I checked my watch. "Better pick up Vomer and Miss Galli. The movie should be over by now—and what about getting them to see the Reverend Abbot like we promised?"

"Yes," the inspector agreed, "let us get this meeting out of the way. After all, what else can go wrong today, aside from the fact that your eye is turning a gorgeous black from your fall in the barbershop?"

I didn't look in the mirror; I was afraid it would shatter.

What in the hell is wrong *this*

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time? I asked myself as we drove up in front of the movie house. The Reverend Otis H. Vomer looked like the Devil had just offered him a junior partnership, and Miss Galli appeared to be downwind of that stockyard again. Yumiko wasn't with them.

"Where else would a person like that be," Vomer snarled in reply to my question, "but inside—thoroughly enjoying that . . . that *filth.*"

Puzzled, I turned and faced Miss Galli. "What on earth could be wrong with a musical? *Six Trumpets,* according to the inspector here, seems to have gotten good billing in the press."

She took in my head and black eye and sneered. "The name of this picture, Mr. Brent, is *Sex Strumpets,* not *Six Trumpets!*"

Ueki cleared his throat apologetically. "How unfortunate that I should make an error like that. Sam, the least I can do is to go directly to the Reverend Abbot."

"It's about time!" Vomer said. "After all we've been through . . . "

I spun on my heel and went to fetch Yumiko. She was in the front row, applauding vigorously a scene I think it best not to mention.

Yumiko was put in a taxi with Miss Galli and Vomer. Ueki gave the driver directions, and we got into the cruiser.

"Sex Strumpets!" the inspector laughed, turning the key in the ignition. "Can you imagine my making a mistake of that magnitude?"

Yep. I could.

The inspector radioed our destination to headquarters and gave orders to pick up the printing equipment and to keep him advised of progress in the search for Murakami.

The Reverend Abbot's monastery was plain — unadorned and simple. From a country lane, unpaved and pitted with potholes, access was gained by a switchback trail cut through mountain pines and bamboo groves, leapfrogging purling rills in a series of footbridges. As we debouched into a dale of green sprinkled with summer wildflowers, the monastery came into view, a compound of wood buildings put up at the base of a ruderal-covered escarpment. There were pebble-lined flower beds along the paths between buildings, and honeysuckle proliferated on the low stone walls of the central garden.

"Quaint," remarked Reverend Vomer, "but it hardly seems a serious place of worship."

"My sentiments exactly," Crystal Galli said, with a toss of the head and a flounce of pleats.

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A robed, shaven-headed monk emerged from one of the buildings, caught sight of us, and walked over, smiling. "May I help you?"

"We are looking for the Reverend Abbot," Ueki said.

"Through the garden, and beyond that clump of bamboo," the monk said, "there is a stream. You will find him there."

We advanced. The stream originated in the mountain heights, changing from spuming rapids to murmuring eddies around flat rocks, then gathering itself into a pool for a moment's respite before resuming its descent.

"That," said Miss Crystal Galli, "is an *abbot?"*

That was. Relaxing in the pool, up to his neck in water, sat the Reverend Abbot.

Inspector Ueki and I bowed, deeply and repeatedly. "I regret the intrusion," Ueki said, "but these people—Otis Vomer and Crystal Galli—have come to see you."

"Aha!" laughed the abbot, regarding Vomer and Miss Galli intently. "Are you certain that I'm the one you're looking for?"

His English was better than mine.

"Of course we are sure," Miss Galli replied. "That is why we are here."

"So be it!" the abbot cried, standing up. (Now I knew what at least one abbot wore under the long, flowing robes: a loincloth.) "Come with me." The Reverend Abbot walked with dignity to a tree limb and retrieved his priestly garb. "It is time to examine your problem."

"There is no problem," Reverend Vomer said. "I am here merely to learn something of other religions."

The Reverend Abbot smiled.

He was a man, and nothing more; that I knew. At the same time, I felt that the Reverend Abbot was very much out of the ordinary. His face was round, almost perfectly so, and there was no tautness—no tension — that I could detect in his voice or in the muscles that work to give us expression. And there was an extraordinary quality about his eyes: the pigmentation of the irises was not uniform, and flecks of topaz stood out in the warmest of browns, at times appearing to swirl like minute lenses through which humor and patience and understanding shone outward to illuminate those about him.

Most amazingly, I felt that the Reverend Abbot's remarks were always directed to me, no matter whom he was talking to, and now, as we sat in the simple furnished room that served as an office, I found myself experiencing rather than just hearing his words.

You came here (the abbot

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said to Reverend Vomer) asking about the nature of my faith, what I believe, but I am not here in faith or belief. I live in and for the knowledge that comes from within, the same knowledge that all of us were born with, the knowledge of joyous being and caring that comes to be buried under all the mental debris that builds up during a lifetime.

What do I offer, then, that justifies my being an abbot—a priest? Those labels, Mr. Vomer, are applied to me by others, and if I were asked to tell what I really am, I would have to say myself—and everybody. Or, to some, nobody.

What we do here, in this monastery, is to make ourselves available for those who come to unlearn, not to learn. If someone comes here to drink our tea, and his cup is already full, first we must empty its contents. That, sir, is the purpose of our meditation—to take the spiritual vessel and pour out the daily trivia so it may be replenished with the joy (not pleasure, *joy)* of enlightenment (you may jot down "satori" in your notebook, Miss Galli, if the term for a state of personal liberation will help).

No, no, Mr. Vomer. There is no mystery about this knowledge. I will give it to you now, but I warn you that you will forget it as soon as you leave these grounds and, in trying to recall what you heard, will twist and pervert it to fit your own concepts. To retain knowledge, one must practice it, Mr. Vomer, through meditation, through unselfish service to others, and through the sharing of the experience with your fellow beings.

This is knowledge, Mr. Vomer: the face of God is on every person, the heart of God is in every breast, and the voice of God is on every tongue. We are all the same being, Mr. Vomer, if we keep our hearts open to the inner light. If not, that face of glory becomes obscured, the heart stilled, and the voice distorted.

"Too simplistic!" said the Reverend Otis H. Vomer. "Only a child could believe it!"

The Reverend Abbot smiled again. "Is it so bad, Mr. Vomer, to experience the world as a child does, before the learning of biases and hatreds and fears? Or," he said gleefully, "is it better to go through life staring at everyone and everything with so much anxious disapproval that your eyes begin to stick out of your head, your face hardens into a mask of constant judgment, your whole purpose in living is to find fault and pass along your own fallacies as truth?"

Then, suddenly: "Sam Brent, what are you thinking about?"

"Me? Why, nothing, Rever-

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end Abbot, nothing at all."

"Wonderful!" the abbot said. "Here," he said to the others, "is a man whose lack of hair and blackened eye suggests a set of frantic circumstances, and yet he can sit here thinking of nothing at all while still being a vital part of all around him."

"I suppose," said Reverend Vomer, "that you find this lack of cerebration commendable. Yes—you would."

I glanced around the room. Inspector Ueki's face was serene, Yumiko was stretched out on the straw matting, snoring gently, and . . .

. . . Miss Crystal Galli was undergoing an incredible metamorphosis, shedding her outer armor of bombazine, shucking designer sunglasses, shaking out curls, and smiling the smile of a happy and healthy young woman, attractive and appealing in blouse and skirt.

"You," she said to the Reverend Otis H. Vomer, "are sanctimonious, hypocritical, and self-righteous." Then, with a pleasant smile, she described him as the gluteal region of an equine.

"You've been brainwashed!" Vomer screamed, face livid.

"I don't think so," she grinned. "Being here with the Reverend Abbot is the first time I've felt normal and human in years."

"Don't dare call him 'Reverend,'" Vomer railed, eyes vitreous. "He's the most irreverent person I've ever met, and you, Miss Galli, are forgetting our mission."

"It's *your* mission now," she corrected. "You came here for ammunition, Otis, intending all along to go back to your misguided followers and strengthen your claim to truth with what you damn as heathenish or pagan. But you know what I think? I think that the only pagans in the world are people like you who preach suspicion and condemnation instead of simple human love." She gazed at the Reverend Abbot shyly. "What I'd like to do is stick around for a while and see what this charming man can do to bring me back to life."

The Reverend Abbot slapped the matting with his hands. "Charming! I've been called many things, but never that! Please, Miss Galli, do stay in Japan longer. We have no accommodations at our monastery, but . . . "

"She is welcome to stay at my home," Inspector Ueki said, "and I know that Sam and Noriko also will help in any manner possible."

"Insanity!" Vomer grated. "There is no sense to any of this!"

The Reverend Abbot got up, strode across the planking of the entranceway, and stood for several moments framed in the

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glow of the afternoon sun. "I will tell you that the monks here are concerned with life, not death or funerals. Yet, looking down the mountainside through the clearing in the trees, I see a hearse parked below. Is that insanity, or does it have significance if only we know how to find it?"

Hearse! I nearly tripped over Yumiko in my haste to keep up with Inspector Ueki as we ran past the Reverend Abbot. His laughter followed us down the mountain trail.

Eiichi Murakami, barber-*cum*-counterfeiter, was confused and penitent. "I came here because I have heard that you are a wise man," he said to the Reverend Abbot. "I am not, and I am sorry that I was stupid enough to think that I could help people by giving them worthless scraps of paper." He held out his manacled hands. "What can I do to rectify my wrongdoing?"

"The first step toward future wisdom," said the Reverend Abbot, "is recognition of past ignorance. You will be tried and sentenced, and once you have served your time, you can return to this monastery and we will work to help you find yourself."

"I have ruined myself and my family," Murakami said. "How can I even think of a future?"

The Reverend Abbot's eyes were filled with compassion. "Ruination exists only in your mind. Your wife's sisters will continue to operate the barbershop, and if you do not try to conceal a sorrow and love that is genuine, all will be well for you in time."

"I must take him in for booking now," Inspector Ueki said. "Ah, Sam, there is something I would like to ask you to do."

"Sure," I said, staring at Reverend Vomer's unyielding back. "Name it."

"There are too many of us to ride back in my cruiser, and it would help if . . . if, ah . . . "

"The hearse! You want me to drive the hearse into town, right?" The idea of tooling through Okayama in that thing kind of appealed to my sense of daring.

"Yes. It is traditional for motorists to give such vehicles a wide berth, so even you should be able to make the trip without mishap."

"Who wants the chance of a lifetime?" I asked, grinning.

Yumiko and Crystal Galli volunteered; the Reverend Otis H. Vomer insisted on riding with the inspector, who, in turn, promised to stop by my house to get his baggage, then deposit him at Okayama Station.

The hearse handled easily enough, but there was room in front for only two, so Yumiko

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asked to sit in back. I couldn't figure out why until I chanced to glance back through the mirror and saw her waving and making faces at startled pedestrians and other drivers.

Where to park? The lot behind my office building, I decided, was as good a place as any. The light at the intersection turned green, and I stepped on the gas just as a trolley came clanging through. "Look out!" I yelled. We screeched and skidded, ramming the talking traffic light near my office.

What happened?

Well, there were a lot of slack-jawed, wide-eyed people on the sidewalk as Yumiko emerged from the back of the wrecked hearse at about the same time that Crystal Galli came running around to check on her with a nearly bald, black-eyed Sam Brent. And there were a few uncertain smiles as we stood hugging each other while the syrupy voice of the traffic light croaked to us all to please wait, and then cut off with a terminal whirr and click.

We were on the evening news, part of the segment dealing with the arrest of Eiichi Murakami. And, when the day finally came to a close, Crystal Galli and Noriko were communicating better than most people who speak the same language, on the basis of feelings that don't need words anyway.

Miss Galli—Crystal—stayed in Okayama another two months, and when she returned to the States, she wasn't at all the same person who arrived with the Reverend Otis H. Vomer, who, I understand, suffered a nervous breakdown when Crystal appeared on national TV with a series of shows featuring some extremely irreverent commentary by the Reverend Abbot.

Eiichi Murakami? He got five years for his folly, choosing (wisely, I think) to work trimming the hair of his fellow inmates instead of as an engraver on the prison newspaper.

Murakami's out on parole now, my hair is back to normal, and there are only three new rules of life I follow closely. The office windows remain closed to keep sparrows out, Yumiko's birthdays are celebrated at home, and I never fall asleep in barbershops.

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FICTION

A Net of Circumstances



by Malcolm McClintick

Illustration by Steve Hetzel

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In the small office, Sergeant Kelso stood stiffly, almost at attention, watching the face of Lieutenant Leill growing redder and redder as the man raved.

"How long have you been in the department? I don't understand it. Don't you have any sense of propriety?"

Kelso thought it very strange that his superior was talking about propriety, in view of the circumstances, but he gritted his teeth and said nothing.

"Those people were parked there to attend the mayor's open house. How did you think they were going to attend it? Did you ever stop to think of that?"

Kelso had not. In his mind's eye he saw the huge gleaming cars, all illegally parked — Cadillacs, Lincolns, a Mercedes or two.

"But they were parked in a no parking zone, sir. No parking at any time, that's what the signs said—"

"Don't tell me what the signs said." Lieutenant Leill sighed heavily and leaned back in his leather-covered swivel chair, his face dark with rage. "I don't know what to do with you, Kelso. Yes, I do know what to do with you. I want you out of uniform. As of today. No, don't say a word. I'm transferring you to the plainclothes division immediately. You'll report to Detective Sergeant Meyer." Leill leaned forward and sighed, even more heavily. "I expect you to screw this up, Kelso. I expect Meyer to give me a bad report on you, for the official files. And then I expect to have your badge."

Kelso took a step back. "Yes, sir." He turned and left the glaring man's office.

An hour later Sergeant George Kelso, newly added to the plainclothes division, sat in the passenger seat of a blue unmarked police car driven by Detective Sergeant Meyer. Kelso hadn't worn this suit for some time, and the pants had become inexplicably tight in the waist. He was eating a yeast doughnut, holding it in its waxed paper, taking large bites.

"That your breakfast?" Meyer asked, frowning.

"No. I ate breakfast earlier," Kelso said. He felt Meyer's eyes on him and shrugged. He was a few pounds overweight, and Meyer was slim. Well, to each his own. Kelso had tried losing weight. It was easier for some people. He was doing well just to stay under the maximum allowed by the department.

Look at me, he thought. This morning I got up and started my tenth year as a uniformed cop, and now I'm in plain-

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clothes. Will wonders never cease?.

Finishing the doughnut, he watched the neighborhoods they were driving through turn from middle-class to blue collar to something very poor indeed.

"A woman named Sarah Parker was strangled to death this morning," Meyer was telling him. Kelso listened attentively; it would be his first plain-clothes investigation. "She was on welfare. Her caseworker, a guy named Mathis, tried to see her but she wouldn't come to the door, so he peered into her house through a window and saw her lying on the floor. He called us from a pay phone."

"Are there any leads so far?" Kelso asked, hoping that was a proper question.

"There never are," Meyer said. "Probably some kid, on dope."

Meyer was small and dark, about Kelso's age of thirty-five but older-looking. His manner was rather surly, or moody, and his speech often sarcastic. Kelso had worked with him before, but always as a uniformed cop. Now he could relate to him as an equal. Almost. He wadded the waxed paper into a neat ball and shoved it into a pocket, got out his pipe, and began trying to light it against the strong breeze coming in through his window. The matches kept going out.

"I'm supposed to file a report on you when this case is wrapped up," Meyer said. "Did you know that?"

"Yes," Kelso said. The pipe, almost lit, went out again. He realized he was nervous.

"This could be your last case," Meyer added.

"Yes," he said. He bit the pipe stem, trying to keep his composure.

A tiny weather-beaten frame house was cordoned off by a bright yellow tape running from stake to stake around the small yard. On the tape in black letters were the words POLICE LINE—DO NOT CROSS. Wind blew the tape in gusts. It was late March, and warm.

"I'm going inside the house to take a look around," Meyer said, parking at the curb. "I want you to examine the grounds. Make notes. Let me know if you find anything." Meyer glared at him doubtfully, then got out of the car and strode toward the house.

Kelso sucked at his pipe, which now was hopelessly out, and put it in his pocket. He got out and went over to the yellow tape, climbed over it, and began walking through the yard and around the side of the house. At one point he stopped to glance back and saw two uniformed cops sitting in a patrol car, watching him. He knew them,

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and waved. They waved back, grinning. Kelso felt a little self-conscious.

All the windows were closed. He wasn't certain what to expect, was just looking. There might be footprints, though it had been dry lately. Besides, the lab crew would have found those. He went up to the back door and examined it.

One of the four windowpanes had been knocked out. Kelso peered inside. Broken glass lay on the floor. Obviously someone had tried to gain access in this manner. He turned and went back to the front and entered the house. A narrow hall led to the back door, which was unlocked. But when he tried to open it, it wouldn't budge.

"Problem?"

He looked up. A uniformed cop stood watching him.

"It won't open," said Kelso.

"I know," said the cop. "It's nailed shut. She must've been paranoid. Every door and window in the place is nailed shut, except for the front door."

"I see."

Kelso wandered into the living room, taking out a small notebook. The front room was small. Both of its windows were heavily curtained, shutting out the daylight. In the dimness three lamps burned. Most of the furniture was old, but in one corner Kelso saw a new-looking recliner, very stylish, all leather, the kind you had to pay hundreds of dollars for. And the old lady had been on welfare? He scribbled a few words in the notebook.

Stepping over to one of the windows, he parted the curtains, tried to look outside. His view was totally obscured by thick shrubs growing up past the panes; it was the same with the other window.

Humming a little tune, he roamed the rest of the house, the tiny kitchen (with a new dishwasher!), the bedroom where she'd been discovered lying on the floor, the bathroom, a miniscule dining room. Everything was dismal and musty, except for the dishwasher, the obviously new recliner, and a few odds and ends. In the bedroom a medicinal odor assailed Kelso's nose. Several times he passed Meyer, who glared and said nothing.

Outside again, Kelso took his pipe out of his jacket pocket and shoved it, unlit, into his mouth. In the warm springlike air he glanced at the notes he'd made, then went around to check the far side of the house. Nothing much—more shrubbery over the windows, except for the bedroom window; drain pipe in need of repair; an outside water meter of the type the water company would install by drilling a hole in your wall. He tried to light his pipe, failed, found

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he was out of matches, pocketed the pipe. Someone had strangled the old lady in her house, in her bedroom. The only way in was through the front door. She was a welfare recipient, but had an expensive new chair and a new dishwasher.

Back at the unmarked police car, he climbed into the passenger seat and sat gazing at the street, trying to think. Meyer returned.

"Kelso!"

"Yes, sir?"

Meyer got in, started the engine. "Here's what I want you to do. Get over to the Welfare Department and find that caseworker she had, that Mathis guy. Ask him all about Sarah Parker, try to develop a profile of her—personality, likes and dislikes, any enemies, that kind of thing." He scowled. "I'll expect a written report."

"Yes, sir," Kelso said. Stop saying sir, he thought. "Can I use my own car?" He knew it was against department policy.

"As long as Leill doesn't find out."

"You wouldn't mind dropping me off at my apartment, would you?"

Meyer muttered something and accelerated, leaving rubber on the street.

Kelso parked his VW Beetle, which he found much easier to drive and infinitely easier to work on than most other cars, in an official parking space in the Welfare Department's parking lot. The space was reserved for someone named Lewis. Inside, he followed tiled halls to the main office and found a secretary.

"Excuse me. I'm George Kelso, from the police department." He showed her his badge. "Is there someone here named Lewis?"

The secretary, an attractive brunette, shook her head.

"No, Mr. Lewis is out of town today."

"Good. Well, how about a Mr. Mathis?"

"Bill? Yes, he's here. Right down the hall, last office on your right."

"Thank you." He smiled at her, felt the smile not working very well. Suddenly he was nervous and his palms were damp. "You wouldn't happen to be doing anything for lunch, would you?" he asked, noticing that she was even much more attractive than he'd at first noticed.

"I'm very busy for lunch," she said.

"Oh."

Last door down the hall on the right. He knocked, someone told him to enter, he went in. A blue-suited fortyish man with black hair and horn-rimmed glasses sat behind a desk, smoking a cigarette, working

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over a stack of file folders, his tie loosened at his collar.

"Mr. Mathis?"

The man glanced up. The light was reflected from his glasses lenses, obscuring his eyes and rendering him expressionless.

"Yes?"

Kelso showed him his badge. "I'm George Kelso, from the police department. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about Sarah Parker?"

Mathis shrugged. "Sure. Go ahead."

"She was your client, right?"

"I don't think of them as clients," Mathis said. "Bums, crooks, creeps, liars, but not clients."

There was a chair near the front of the desk, but Kelso hadn't been asked to sit; he remained standing. "This Sarah Parker was one of the people you saw from time to time?"

Mathis nodded.

"So, the point is, you knew her. Can you tell me anything about her, especially whether she might've had any enemies, that kind of thing?" Kelso waited, hoping for useful information.

Mathis snorted. "Enemies. Hell, nobody knew that old woman. I was probably the only living person who ever saw her in her own house, except for the meter reader. She didn't have a car, lived like a recluse, walked to the grocery or the pharmacy or took a cab. That's a funny thing. Cabs are expensive. She was on welfare, and supposedly down and out. Where'd she get the cash for cabs and dishwashers and recliners?"

Dishwashers and recliners, Kelso thought, taking out his notebook again. Something began gnawing at the back of his mind.

"You say she saw the meter reader?"

"Yeah, from the water company. Complained all the time about how he was always invading her privacy to read her meter, which was in her house." Mathis paused to light another cigarette, regarded Kelso through the smoke, and said, "Who killed her, by the way?"

"That's what I was hoping you could tell me." Kelso eyed him closely, trying to see through the glaring glasses lenses.

"I can't tell you a thing. Unless the meter reader did it. Well, I can tell you this. There was a rumor floating around that she was batty, that she'd inherited some kind of fortune and was hoarding it right there in her house. Once I asked her if she'd stashed away a bundle, the hundred thousand the rumors mentioned, and she told me it was all a lot of malicious gossip started by people who wanted her off welfare. She said

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they were all Nazis."

"So you don't think she had a fortune stashed away?"

"Not for a minute."

Kelso took out his pipe. He'd spotted a book of matches on the desk, but was reluctant to ask for one. Some people were funny about their matches. He scrutinized his notes.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I get the impression you didn't care very much for Sarah Parker. Is there some particular reason?"

Mathis seemed to hesitate for a moment, then replied irritably: "I've got a suspicion she was ripping us off, committing welfare fraud. But I couldn't prove it. She kept buying stuff, expensive stuff. Like last month, she popped up with a new dishwasher. And just recently she got one of those expensive leather recliners, must've set her back close to a thousand. She—" He stopped suddenly and puffed hard at his cigarette, saying nothing.

Flipping to a new page in his notebook, Kelso cleared his throat, "Could you tell me what happened this morning when you went to her house, Mr. Mathis?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, yesterday I called and made an appointment to see her this morning at nine. My first appointment of the day. But when I got there, just after nine, she didn't answer my knock. She was old and frail, close to eighty, and I thought she might've fallen or something, so I stepped around to a window and looked in. That's when I saw her, lying on the floor of her bedroom. So I went down the street to a drugstore and called the police." He spread his palms widely, the cigarette between his lips. "That's about it."

"I see." Kelso was writing. "And did you wait for the police then, Mr. Mathis?"

The caseworker seemed to blush slightly. "Well, no. I gave my name and address, but I had other appointments to keep, so I went on about my business." He shrugged. "Your people knew where to find me."

"Have you been a caseworker long, Mr. Mathis?"

"Too long. I'd retire tomorrow if I could, but who ever heard of a social worker retiring? Did you?"

"Well . . . no . . . "

"We don't get paid diddly, especially not me. I'll tell you something. I'm the only person in this office without an MSW."

"An MS . . . "

"Master's degree in social work. I've only got a bachelor's in sociology. You want to know why?"

Kelso put the notebook away and nodded.

"Twenty years ago when I was an undergraduate, I played

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around a lot and graduated with only a two point four average. The local school of social work requires a two point five undergrad average for admission to their master's program, and they make no exceptions. What the hell kind of attitude is that, I ask you? They're teaching people to go out and help society, and they keep me out of the MSW program because twenty years ago I didn't make a few more A's. So I'm stuck with an obsolete degree, and all the other starting MSW caseworkers make more money than I do, and I'll never be a supervisor. What do you think about that?"

Kelso didn't know what to say. He felt embarrassed at not being able to think of anything. He shrugged. Once, during the year just after he'd gotten out of the army, he himself had been a social worker, but he didn't say anything. He didn't want to hurt Mr. Mathis's feelings.

"What it amounts to, sergeant," Mathis said, "is that I'm stuck, I'm caught up in the net of circumstances, like a fly in a web."

"Well, thanks very much for your time, Mr. Mathis." Kelso backed away from the caseworker's desk. The nagging had grown stronger in the back of his mind; he was in a hurry to get outside and check his notes. Something was definitely wrong.

"If I were you, I'd check that meter reader's alibi," Mathis said. The light still glinted in his glasses.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Mathis."

Kelso left. On the way out he borrowed a match from the attractive secretary and lit his pipe. Then he sat in his VW and read over his notes.

Yes, something was wrong—very wrong.

He called the department from the first public phone booth he found, and was connected with Meyer.

"Kelso? Where are you?"

"I've just talked to the caseworker," he said. "I have a question."

"Well? What is it?"

"Did anyone go through Sarah Parker's personal things? Her papers?"

"Of course."

"Was there a receipt for some furniture?"

Kelso heard papers being shuffled. "I wrote it down," Meyer said gruffly. "I hope *you've* been writing down everything, Kelso. Okay, here it is. Yeah, there was a receipt for a new leather recliner, sale price nine hundred and fifty bucks, delivered yesterday afternoon at four P.M. Why?"

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"I was just curious. I've got a theory—"

A heavy sigh, almost as heavy as some of Leill's. "I want you to help me with some of this paperwork, Kelso, and maybe question a few other people. I don't have time for theories. Did you find out anything about Sarah Parker from her caseworker?"

"Well, yes, but that's what I ——"

"Good. Get on over here. Now."

"Yes, sir," Kelso said, and hung up.

On the way back to headquarters in his VW, he decided. There was no use trying to talk to Meyer about it. Lieutenant Leill was the only one who could do what he wanted done. He felt nervous, but determined.

Leill's face was even redder than usual.

"A search warrant," he shouted. "What on earth do you want with a search warrant?"

"If you'll just let me explain," said Kelso. He stood in front of Leill's desk again, but this time wearing his suit and not his uniform. His pipe had gone out and was in his pocket. He'd gone over everything one more time in his mind; now if only Lieutenant Leill would listen.

"Kelso, you've got about one minute—"

"Sarah Parker had a welfare caseworker," Kelso said hurriedly. "A man named Bill Mathis. Mathis claims he went to her house this morning to keep a nine A.M. appointment, but when she didn't answer his knock he peered in her window and saw her body lying on the bedroom floor."

"Yes, yes, so get to the point. What do you want with a warrant?"

"I'm making the point, sir. First of all, Sarah Parker's house wasn't broken into. There was an attempt to make it look that way by breaking out a window in her back door, but that door and all her windows had been nailed shut. Nobody was ever allowed in her house except a meter reader and her caseworker."

"Meter reader?"

"Yes, sir, from the water company. But she'd gotten one of those outdoor meters installed, so the meter man wouldn't have to enter her house any more. That leaves only Mr. Mathis who ever went inside, in my opinion. He claims to have gone there at nine this morning and not gotten in, then to the drugstore to call us, then to keep other appointments. But he knew she had a brand new leather recliner, and that recliner was only delivered yesterday afternoon. And he couldn't have seen it through

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her windows because all the ones in the living room are heavily draped, and shrubbery grows up over them anyway. So the only way Mr. Mathis could know about her new recliner would be if he was actually in her house between four P.M. yesterday when it was delivered and this morning when she was killed. Which means he probably killed her."

Leill, as Kelso had feared, was staring, his eyes practically bursting from their sockets.

"And why would *he* have killed her?"

"To steal the hundred thousand dollars she'd inherited at some time or other and stashed away in her house. That's why I want a search warrant, to look for the money in Mr. Mathis's house." Kelso waited, breathlessly, having gotten it all out.

"*That's* the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard in all my years on the force!"

"Yes, sir."

"But I'm going to get you your search warrant, Kelso."

"Thank you, sir."

"Because I want to see you hang yourself. We're going to put your name on the request form, and you will personally sign it, and you will be personally responsible. In a separate affidavit I am going to list you as my reliable source of information. If this goes the way I know it will go, you'll owe an apology to Mathis, and I'll see that you're kicked right out of the department."

"Yes, sir."

That afternoon he and Leill and Meyer drove to the Welfare Department with a warrant issued by a judge of the criminal courts, picked up Mr. Mathis, who was highly indignant, and drove to Mathis's house on Third Street. The search began.

It went thoroughly but badly. Two uniformed officers met them at the house with various tools. Leill didn't want to destroy anything, but nothing was left to chance. Kelso roamed around wondering what would happen, going over and over his argument in his mind. Leather recliner delivered late afternoon. Mathis arrives the next morning at nine, knocks, gets no answer, looks in a window, sees the woman's body, goes to a phone, calls police, goes about his business. But he knew about the new recliner. He'd called for an appointment, the day before. Perhaps the old lady mentioned the new leather recliner to him on the phone. But surely she wouldn't have done that, not to her welfare caseworker. No, Mathis must have been in the house. He must have strangled her and taken her money.

But where was the money?

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Nothing was found. Leill's smirk grew to a gloat. Meyer scowled and fumed. Mathis sat indignantly in an armchair and occasionally glanced at whoever passed by.

Perplexed, Kelso wandered to the rear of the house and stood in the utility room, gazing at the furnace. It was gas, so Mathis couldn't have burned anything in it. He wouldn't have burned money, in any event. The furnace—so there was no basement. Then there must be a crawlspace. He walked back to the living room.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mathis—is there a crawlspace under your house?"

"Not that I know of," Mathis said, not hiding his anger.

Kelso started to apologize, then felt Meyer's eyes on him and didn't. Meyer was probing all the sofa cushions. Leill was down on his hands and knees, an undignified position for a lieutenant, peering under the edges of the rug. Kelso returned to the utility room and hesitated; then, recalling an older house he'd once lived in, tried to squeeze himself between the furnace and one wall.

It was just barely negotiable. His stomach almost prevented it. But then he was through, standing in a cramped space between the back of the furnace and the rear wall. At about knee level was what he was looking for: a square wooden panel set into the wall. Bending with difficulty, and swearing to lose weight, he removed the panel. He peered into the darkness of the crawlspace.

Scarcely two feet in, lying in the dirt, the suitcase was just visible.

They opened it in the living room. It had one of those little leather tags attached to the handle, containing a card with the name SARAH PARKER in ballpoint pen. The suitcase was crammed full of money, more money than Kelso had seen in his life, in rubber-banded packets of bills.

Kelso glanced around the room excitedly, but everyone —Meyer, Leill, even Mr. Mathis—avoided his eyes.

"I wonder how much is in there?" said Meyer. "My God, there must be—"

"Over a hundred thousand dollars," said Mathis, his voice barely audible. "I counted it this morning."

"Read him his rights," muttered Leill, and sighed heavily.

Meyer read him his rights and added, "You admit you killed her?"

Mathis nodded, slumping in his chair. "It speaks for itself, doesn't it?" When he raised his head to glance briefly at Kelso, light no longer glinted in his glasses lenses and his eyes were

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plainly visible; there was bitterness in them. "Caught in the net of circumstances, like a fly—"

He seemed to lose his voice, and looked away again.

"Where'd she get the money?" Meyer was asking.

"She told me she inherited it." Mr. Mathis's voice had returned; now he was merely sullen. "She'd been saving it for years. She was nuts, she had no intention of ever spending it, just saving it, till she died. She wouldn't give me any of it, it was going to waste . . . "

"Mr. Mathis," Kelso said, "you were the woman's caseworker. Why did she confide in you about having all that money?"

Mathis shrugged, as if he no longer cared. "She trusted me."

Kelso stood on the front walk with Lieutenant Leill. It was almost five. Mr. Mathis had been taken away by the two uniformed cops.

"Sir?"

"What is it now, Kelso?"

"Since the case is solved, will I be going back to, uh, uniformed duties?"

The sigh that Leill let escape his lips was the heaviest yet. "No, Kelso. You will stay on plainclothes duty." He said it angrily, without looking at Kelso, then hurried to his car.

It didn't bother Kelso at all that everyone had driven off and left him standing alone on the sidewalk. He strolled down to the drugstore, called a cab, and went outside to wait, the afternoon sun warm on his face. George Kelso, plainclothes detective. He had made it.

He'd even solved his first case.

He had his pipe out and was starting to light it when he noticed the huge Lincoln Continental parked at a meter with the red violation indicator showing. Kelso smiled, remembering, and started to look away. But then he hesitated, looked back, and strolled over to the Lincoln. He pulled out the citation book he'd kept with him. One more, for old times' sake, he thought, and hummed a little tune as he wrote out the ticket.

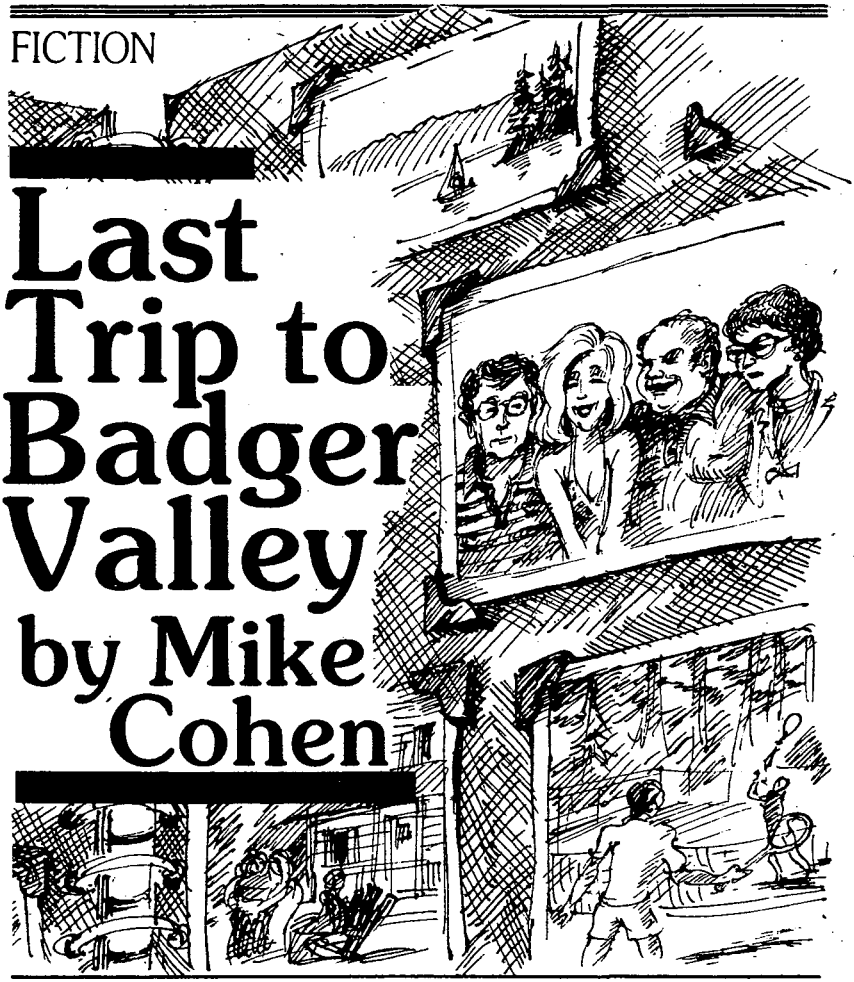
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FICTION

Last Trip to Badger Valley

by Mike Cohen



Everybody thought Roger Pennysworth's wife was the smartest woman in the world, but unfortunately she wasn't the prettiest. Roger thought Ellen Casey was.

Ellen was the wife of Frank Casey, and she had a skin of velvet and a body that would boil water. Ellen believed in flaunting the flauntable.

"Why can't you just let well enough alone?" Frank Casey asked his wife. "You are indeed a beautiful woman; everybody knows it. Why isn't that enough?"

"Frank, for heaven's sake,

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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what a thing to complain about, your wife's too beautiful."

"You wave it around, you cheapen it, you make yourself look common."

"What's the point of being beautiful if I can't enjoy it?"

"What do you hope to accomplish with your antics?"

"I have more fun, that's what I hope to accomplish. Does it bother you when I have fun?"

"The way you do it? Damn right it bothers me. It bothers a lot of other people, too."

"Like Roger Pennysworth?" Ellen squeaked a giggle and teased her husband with a shimmy in his direction.

"Like Roger Pennysworth's wife," Frank Casey said, making a grab for what Ellen was throwing.

She twisted away, pouted. "Molly Pennysworth has more brains in one nostril than I have in my whole head. And I admit it. And she admits it, too. Talk about waving it around, that woman makes me look like a moron every chance she gets. So poor dumb little me, what can I do?"

"You can lay off her husband."

"I can fight back, that's what I can do. She makes me look stupid, I make her look ugly. Fair's fair."

Frank Casey threw his swim trunks into his bag, saw he had room, folded in another sport shirt. "When it comes down to the payoff, it'll be a battle of wits. When that happens, you know who has to be the winner."

"We'll see. So far, I'm way ahead."

"So far. Look. I wish you'd cut it out. I don't like it a damn bit. We've got something good going, and you're going to louse it up."

"Something good. You bet. You know why we've got it? You think it's because of your great salesmanship? Or because of me?"

"Pennysworth Chemical is my best account."

Frank hadn't answered her question so she answered it herself: "Because of me," she said. She swung a hip this way, a hip that way. Watching the mirror, she liked what she saw. She'd remember it when she needed a shot of spice; she'd keep it in the act.

Frank set their bags in the trunk of the car, hooked up his seat belt, started the engine. Ellen was still talking: "And that's not all. No matter how good a salesman you are or aren't and aside from the fact that he buys from you, he doesn't need to invite us down for all these lovely weekends on the lake, for heaven's sake. Do you think we'd be going down there today if I were as ugly as his wife?"

"Molly Pennysworth is far

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from ugly."

"She's twice as old as I am. She's got all the money in the world and she's so damn dowdy. If I looked only half as bad as she does, none of this would happen, he wouldn't buy from you, and we wouldn't even know they had that gorgeous place."

"You keep on the way you've been going, it won't matter what we know; we'll never be invited again."

"The way I'm going, Roger will never stop inviting us."

"His wife will."

"How can she?"

"She'll convince him. She'll come up with a good reason."

"There's no good reason. Nobody'll ever catch us at anything because everything Roger and I do is just innocent fun."

"That's what you keep telling me."

"And that's what he keeps telling her. Because it's true."

Frank turned the car into the interstate entrance, accelerated to keep-up speed. "You can keep saying innocent," he said, "and Roger can keep saying innocent, but I'm nobody's fool and I'm not buying and Molly is damned sure nobody's fool so you can bet on it, she's not buying either. So leave it to Molly; she'll win. Sooner or later, if she can't hang you for a sheep, she'll hang you for a goat."

"Is that from the Bible?"

"If it is, you'd better start praying. Because this could turn out to be our last lovely weekend at the Pennysworths' lake house."

The Pennysworths' place on Badger Valley Lake was an example of what anybody at all could put together backed by Roger's millions and Molly's superb taste. The house was peak-roofed, a comfortable looking farmhouse-like structure that lay across the cheek of a gentle knoll. This way it faced a lush green lawn that reached to the edge of the sun-sparked lake, that way it faced a deep and dark wilderness of pines that blocked sight of the road that lay beyond.

The Pennysworths came out to greet Frank and Ellen at the porte cochere, Roger with a jovial grin, a wave for Frank and a hug for Ellen, Molly with handshakes and a gracious smile. Roger was balding, somewhat paunchy, a man in his middle fifties, his wife perhaps ten years younger. She was not at all as unattractive as Ellen had described her, but at her age, of course, the gloss of youth was behind her and the bloom of dignity and intellect with which some women supplant it was invisible to Ellen's narrow vision.

The Caseys found the guest suite without assistance—this

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was their fifth visit to Badger Valley. Frank got the bags taken care of and, switching to tennis shorts, was back out in minutes. Ellen took longer.

"I'm determined," she announced when she finally returned. "This time I'll really get a suntan." Dramatically, as in the unveiling of a proud new work of art, she dropped her covering robe and, with a wiggle, let them see. "I bought this swimsuit especially."

Frank was the only one with the callousness to gasp. "You paid real money for those emperor's clothes?" he said, hoping to cover his embarrassment with a wash of dubious humor. Roger's mouth fell open but his eyes widened appreciatively. Molly remained impassive; the relaxed smile she'd worn before survived unchanged. Well, maybe there was one change: deep within her eyes, Frank thought he saw the clash of flint and steel, sparks that could turn to wildfire.

Well, no, Frank told himself on second thought, Molly's not upset; she's amused.

"A rag, a bone, and a hank of hair," Molly said.

Awkwardly, her postured cat dance interrupted, Ellen turned and in her near nakedness faced the other woman. "Me?" she said.

"Kipling," Molly said.

Roger to the rescue: "Do you like Kipling?" he asked Molly.

"I don't know," she answered on cue. "I never kippled."

It was one of the little jokes that had stayed with them from their courtship days, a part of the folklore of their marriage.

Ellen missed the point. Kipling, of course, was a poet; she knew that. But what was funny? Why were they laughing? At her? She wondered if that saleswoman had conned her, if the swimsuit she'd been sold as charmingly piquant was, instead, just a burlesque blunder the shop's buyer had been stuck with.

"Hey, everybody," Molly announced cheerfully, "it's time for tennis."

"Right!" Frank said. "I'll get our rackets." He headed for the car.

"Not me," Roger said. He waved helplessly at Molly. "Honey, you push me too hard. I'm a fat old man."

"You're not old. And you're not fat, either. But you will be if you don't exercise."

"Exercise burns off more pounds moving a big weight than a small weight," Roger said. "I read it in a book. So if I want to lose pounds, it's better if I'm fat."

Momentarily off stage center, Ellen unobtrusively regained her robe and slid it around her shoulders. She would have welcomed the opportunity to change

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into tennis clothes, but with Molly and Frank declared in and Roger out, there was no place for her.

"Go ahead, Molly," Roger said. "You and Frank get started. Maybe in a little while, Ellen and I will come and make it doubles. I'll see how I feel."

How Roger felt was apparently not like tennis; how he felt was apparently like sailing. From the tennis court behind the house, Molly and Frank saw Roger and Ellen heading down the gravel walk toward the dock, Ellen out of her robe again, her scarcely contained salients provocatively conspicuous, Roger, no longer a reclining fat old man, Roger now a prancing fat young man.

Molly and Frank dawdled through a couple of games of tennis, neither paying much attention to the score, both very much aware of the sloop, its canvas flopping lazily in the feckless breeze, making slow headway toward the point of land that marked the boundary between the Pennysworths' bay and the main body of the lake.

As the top of the sail disappeared around the point, Molly caught the ball with a wild sweep of her racket and sent it high over Frank's head into the back-court wire.

"Game's over," she announced. "I'm pooped." Her face wore a smile of sorts, but this time there was no question about her eyes: the flint was in there clashing with steel, and Frank could sense a vast tinder dryness nearing flashpoint.

"You sit yourself down," Frank said. He led her to a table and chair arrangement in the shade of a giant red maple. "I'll go fetch the gin and tonics."

"You know where everything is?"

"Of course."

After the second drink, Molly gave up smiling. She was a tired, aging woman and if she was going to be able to meet the challenge of battle again, she needed to use the quiet in-between times for restoration. They chatted about everything except what both were thinking about: the sloop that didn't reappear. They tried playing tennis again, but that went as badly this time as it had the first time.

Back under the maple, sipping still another drink, Molly said: "You're an awfully nice young man, Frank. And your wife is very beautiful. Are you living happily ever after?"

"We've only been married two years. Ever after starts later."

Something was moving across the point at the end of the bay, but it turned out to be a motorboat. "If at all," Molly said. She was trying to smile again. She asked for another drink.

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The excuse when, finally, three hours later, the sloop got back was that they had gone too far and the expected afternoon breeze had not come up to bring them home. Molly could have asked Roger why he hadn't used the auxiliary motor, but that would have launched a direct confrontation and Molly knew there are better ways to win wars than by fighting.

They went to the Smokehouse for dinner that evening, Molly wearing a name designer classic linen suit over a soft silk blouse and adorned in tasteful understatement with a strand of matched natural pearls. But all the wealth invested in the beautification of Mrs. Pennysworth was wasted because in the presence of the dazzling Mrs. Casey, who noticed?

Well, Roger noticed. One look at his wife and he went back to noticing Ellen. Continuously. One would have thought he'd seen enough during all those hours on the sloop, but the man's appetite for pulchritude was apparently insatiable. And when they got back to the house, Roger pointed out that it was only ten o'clock, they still had time for a little Scrabble. It wasn't, it was obvious to everyone, the Scrabble board that Roger was interested in being around.

Ellen hated Scrabble because this was one of the games at which Molly made her look stupid. She did it again tonight, too, pointing out in language oh-so-scrupulously-polite all the little blunders on Ellen's part, the missed opportunities to gain much higher scores. And the spelling errors. And the flubs in arithmetic when adding up her points. Ellen complained at last that she had a headache —undoubtedly a real one—and with a sudden pouty good night, she made a run to bed.

Ellen managed to avoid further involvement in Scrabble, but a couple of times she did get caught at bridge where the helpful pointers for the simpleton can be—and were—absolutely devastating. But Ellen got even: she managed a two hour disappearance with Roger on a trip to the grocery store for a bottle of milk (excuse: flat tire); and a three hour horseback ride with Roger (lost on those damn crooked trails).

Monday afternoon, the three day holiday weekend ended, and with thank you's and handshakes and an exchange of brave and weary smiles, Frank and Ellen stowed their bags and themselves in their car and drove away.

"Molly's back there seething," Ellen smirked.

"I can't imagine why."

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"I guess I showed her."

"Up to your same old tricks," Frank said.

"Tricks? Please, Frank. Do you know the street value of that word?"

"That wasn't what I meant, Ellen. But now that you point it out, yes. My choice of the word was perfect."

"Come on, now. It was supposed to be a fun weekend. And except for those damn games, it was. I had a wonderful time."

"I asked you to please lay off. Roger's company is my number one account. And that place of theirs is gorgeous. It's perfect. All those weekend vacations absolutely free. I asked you not to louse it up."

"What are you accusing me of? What did I do?"

"You threw yourself at him, that's what. You teased him. That bollicky bathing suit, I couldn't believe it. That ride on the sailboat. All your conniving and sneaking away—"

"Roger loved every minute of it. He can't wait to get us back."

"He'll never get us back. Molly won't let him."

"She'll let him. He's the boss. She can't stop him."

"She won't stop him. Not that way. She'll do it with smarts. She'll work out something. He'll think it's *his* idea."

"You're dreaming."

"That's what you think. Well, you may be prettier. And you may be younger. And you may be bustier. But she's smarter than you are, and she'll find a way."

"What way?"

"I don't know what way. She's smarter than I am, too." Frank remembered Molly's farewell, her lingering handclasp, the serenity in her eyes, the absence of flint and steel. "She may already have found it," he said.

The Caseys lived in a neat little house in a neat little subdivision. They had a neat little lawn and a neat garage. Frank carried their bags up to their bedroom and set them on the bed. He opened his bag and began the routine of unpacking.

"Let's get these bags emptied and I'll make us a drink," Frank said.

"I don't want a drink. I've had enough to drink. One thing I don't need is another drink."

"Well, unpack anyway so I can stow the bags."

She pulled the zipper around, lifted the lid.

"And get rid of that damned bathing suit," he said. "Throw it away."

"Do you know how much this bathing suit cost?"

"I don't care what it cost. it's indecent."

"Roger liked it. He told me he did."

"I bet."

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She hung the swimsuit over the back of a chair, went back to the bag to work on what was left: a couple of dresses, some underwear, slacks. Suddenly she stopped.

"Frank!" she squeaked.

"What?"

"Look here!"

"Right now I'm busy looking *here.*" Out of his bag he pulled a couple of sport shirts he hadn't worn and placed them in a drawer.

"Frank! Come here!" Ellen had backed away from her bag, stood staring at it in shock as if it held a snake.

"What the hell's the matter?" Frank came close, saw. It wasn't a snake. A snake would have been better.

"Where did it come from?" he said.

"You know."

"Dammit, I don't know!"

"It's hers, Frank, the one she wore to dinner."

"You stole her pearls!"

"You think I would? You know me, Frank, I'm not a thief."

"You tried to steal her husband."

"Only to play with. This is different. You know I wouldn't."

"They must be looking for them, desperately, all over."

Ellen approached the bag, hesitated, gathered courage, reached out, let a finger, gingerly, touch the pearls, swiftly drew away. The mind of the woman fathomed the mind of the other woman two hundred miles away. "Roger is looking desperately," she said. "Molly is play-acting looking desperately."

"We have to send them back."

"We can't." She was touching them again, holding them between thumb and forefinger. Lifting, she held the string at arm's length. She grimaced.

Frank sank to the edge of the bed, held his head in sweaty palms. "Why not?"

"It would only make things worse. Right now, Roger thinks ninety-nine percent we're crooks. You want to make it a hundred?"

Frank swore. He stood up. He swung a punch at his suitcase and knocked it to the floor. He watched Ellen toying with the pearls, pouring them tenderly from one hand to the other. He wanted to hurt her. But you can't hit a woman. So he turned again to the surrogate, he kicked his bag, sent it tumbling, rumbling across the room.

But Ellen didn't notice. Ellen was studying the mirror, enchanted by what she saw, the rich loveliness of her silken throat blending softly with the luminescence of her treasured new pearls.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

Where did it come from, and what does it mean? We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, N.Y., N.Y. 10017.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

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BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



The New York Times

LEO BRUCE

I had a fantastical image of myself presiding over a large, formal dinner party. The entire guest list was composed of my favorite fictional detectives, along with their friends and, in some cases, biographers. I continued to spin out this daydream to its logical conclusion, and although I spent great care in the selection of the menu, the wine list, and my designer gown, I regret to report that my efforts resulted in dismal failure. All too clearly was I able to conjure up a picture of mild-mannered Albert Campion unsuccessfully attempting small talk with irascible Sherlock Holmes; impatient Gervase Fen fuming over the apparently inane chatter of bespectacled Johnson Johnson; and the look on Archie Goodwin's face when he learns that his charming dinner partner is to be . . . Miss Marple. Do you, too, get the picture?

I was surprised by this alarming fiction. If few of these people would get along at an elegant dinner, then how is it that I—their hostess—am attracted to each and every diverse one? Am I exceptionally tolerant and good-natured, one of those rare creatures who can overlook everyone's peccadilloes? (Those closest to me would

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hotly deny the possibility of this being the case.) Or, more likely, is it merely easier to get along with motley types when they are confined to the pages of a book? Undeniably, my favorite fictional sleuths are highly individualistic, often temperamental, and very quirky (as *their* close friends would certainly not deny).

All of these musings are recorded to introduce you to the estimable Sergeant William Beef, the creation of author Leo Bruce (the pseudonym of Rupert Croft-Cooke). You see, the very idea of becoming fast friends with someone of markedly different background, taste, and temperament is relevant to any discussion of Beef. Why? Because Beef's chronicler, the "crime writer" Lionel Townsend, is singularly unlike Beef in almost every way. Their sparring barely camouflages a basically strong affection between the two men, and a relationship that is mutually profitable. But there is also friction—Beef, for instance, dragging Townsend into the rowdy public bar for a pint and a round of darts, to Townsend's disapproval—which seems to make the stakes even higher, increase the pressure on poor old Beef to succeed, and add no little amount of humor to the novels.

Beef arrived on the crime scene in London in 1936 as the star of a novel entitled *Case for Three Detectives*. He was then in his late forties, a flat-footed cop on the Braxham force with a "red-veined face and straggling ginger mustache," happily married to a plain but loyal missus, and most definitely wedded to England's working class. The plot—a locked-room mystery—pitted the plebeian Beef against three famous detectives who suspiciously resembled Wimsey, Poirot, and Father Brown. Yet it was the beer-swilling Beef who solved the crime, and by the third book (*Case with Four Clowns*, 1939), Beef had left the force, moved to lodgings as near to Baker Street as were affordable, and hung out his shingle as a private inquiry agent.

Townsend, meanwhile, for better or worse, had hitched his fortune as a writer to Beef's star. He is a "public school man" himself; he lives alone, considers himself a literary figure, and eventually even inherits a small fortune from a murdered aunt. (It's one of two cases presented in *Neck and Neck*, a later book.) Beef's bluntness embarrasses Townsend when they're among the rich, although the biographer grudgingly admits Beef's skill at prying information out of the

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many who make up the rest of the world.

Nonetheless, it is the bane of Townsend's existence, this fact of Beef's humble origins. And he often communicates as much to the usually implacable investigator. Beef finally expostulates in annoyance, "The trouble with you . . . is that you haven't got any subtlety. That's what's the matter with your books. You ought to let the readers work it out for themselves sometimes. Like a crossword puzzle. . . . You go at things like a bull at a gate. How can I be a Man of Mystery and a Great Detective when you go about asking me downright silly questions the way you do? All I can say is, after all the detective stories you read you ought to know better." For once, Lionel is speechless.

Bruce's plots *are* twisty and engaging, though, and he plays fair with his readers. We know all that Beef knows and if, like the sergeant, we are acute at adding the pertinent information to our own versions of Beef's "solid official-looking notebook which had played so dependable a part in his previous cases," we too might come to the correct conclusions. Townsend is always fooled, though. And so was I. Of Bruce, critic Charles Shibuk said, "His subtlety is outstanding, and his efforts at misdirection are worthy of Agatha Christie."

There are only eight Beef mysteries, although Bruce went on to write another series of mysteries featuring a professor and amateur sleuth named Carolus Deene. Three of the Beef novels have recently become available in paperbacks (Academy Chicago Press, $4.50), and the same publisher has announced publication of one of the Deene books as well. *Case with Four Clowns, Neck and Neck,* and *Cold Blood* will introduce you to Beef nicely.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Through the Valley of Death, by E.M.A. Allison, is something off the beaten path, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Oh, there's a murder, to be sure, and it's followed up by the attempted murder of the senior investigator. So what's new, you ask? That's easy. The setting is inside a Cistercian monastery, in the year 1379. The monks, priests, and lay brothers who inhabit the isolated British abbey are snowbound with their guests—two unrelated parties, one headed by an earl, the other by the Bishop of Wakefield. At dinner the former identity of a late-in-life monk is revealed (he was a notorious soldier/marauder in France), and that night he is

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strangled with a monk's cincture. Brother Barnabas, a shyly sensible and very unworldly monk, is assigned the task of determining the murderer's identity. His methodical questions unearth a number of heretofore hidden evils within the abbey walls, and the knowledge threatens his deep faith, and then his very life. The details of fourteenth century life in an abbey are fascinating, and the characters—especially dear old Barnabas—make this an especially entertaining whodunit. (Doubleday Crime Club, $11.95, 185 pp.)

Fans of Elmore "Dutch" Leonard probably know that **Split Images** is now available in paperback (Avon, $2.95, 282 pp.). Anyone who hasn't read "Dutch" can start with this book, and quickly learn why his fans are legion. *Split Images* has it all: high-wire tension, full-blooded characters, the pace of a speed chase, and a heartbreaking romance. There's plenty of action, all of it credible in light of Leonard's characters: a bored multimillionaire who discovers that he enjoys murder; an ex-cop too small to play with the big guys; a beautiful female journalist still trying to show her mettle; and Lieutenant Bryan Hurd, who is forced to break some rules himself—or lose the game. The scene is Detroit, and then Florida, and both are so realistically drawn that one is transported to their ethnic neighborhoods, seedy motels, and wealthy estates. But it is finally the characters who have the ability to raise this psychological thriller to the level of tragedy.

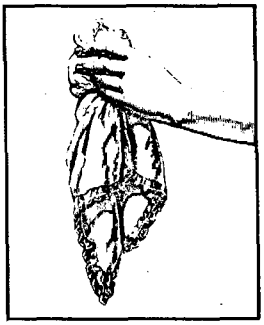
I couldn't resist a book with the intriguing title **The Cable Car Murder,** and after zipping through Elizabeth Atwood Taylor's San Francisco mystery, I was pleased I had succumbed to impulse. A well-to-do matron falls (is pushed?) in front of a trolley, and dies horribly. Within the month her lovely daughter dies on her way back to an eastern college when her plane blows up, the apparent work of a heretofore unknown terrorist group. Two years later, quite by chance, the first victim's half-sister, Maggie, bumps into an ex-police-detective named Patrick O'Reagan, who happened to witness the trolley accident. The two of them hit it off. She's a young widow, an artist, and a reformed alcoholic; he's still smarting from a painful divorce, and no stranger to depression, either. But they have one other thing in common: both thought the accidental-death ruling of Maggie's sister didn't really fit the bill. So they team up to do some private investigation on their own.(Fingerprint Mystery Series, St. Martin's Press, $5.95, 246 pp.)

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CASES ON FILE

The Murder of Joseph Bowne Elwell

by Russel Crouse



When a gentleman is found with an unexplained bullet hole in his head, the French, we are told, have a way of exclaiming: *"Cherchez la femme!"* The phrase has long since crossed the ocean. To the American police it has become, and rightly so, just an expression, sometimes applicable, oftener empty. But amateur detectives—and when murder makes the headlines who is not among their number?—cherish the idea for romance, if nothing more.

And so, to those who were on the outside of that somber house in West 70th Street in which Joseph Bowne Elwell, the bridge whist expert, was found breathing his last, the quest for his murderer became the most bizarre and kaleidoscopic pursuit of feminine phantoms of our time. To the police it was always no more than a grim and systematic hunt. But neither warm imagination nor cold evidence was to penetrate its very simplicity. It remains today the most baffling of our modern contributions to dark pages.

It is just as well to begin at the beginning. On the morning of June 11th, 1920, at ten minutes past eight o'clock, Mrs. Marie Larsen let herself in the front door of the somewhat drab three-story house at 244 West 70th Street. It was the home of Joseph Bowne Elwell and she was his housekeeper. She arrived usually at about this time,

From the Book Murder Won't Out *by Russel Crouse. Copyright 1932 by Russel Crouse. Published by Doubleday & Co., Inc.*

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waited for Elwell to awaken, prepared his breakfast, and brushed up generally.

As Mrs. Larsen closed the door behind her she noticed the acrid smell of powder smoke. With the vague intention of tracing it later, she started down the hallway. As she passed the living room, the first door to her right, she looked in and saw a man, clad only in pajamas, slumped in a chair. At first she did not recognize him. He was bald.

Mrs. Larsen stepped to the living room door and spoke. There was no answer. She entered. Now she recognized the man as Elwell. She had never before seen him without his toupee. Nor had any of his friends, for that matter, it developed later. There was blood on his face. It came from a large bullet wound in the center of his forehead. It dripped onto a letter which lay opened in his lap, and several others, unopened, on the floor at his feet. He was breathing heavily. She called to him and got no answer. Frightened, she ran to the corner and brought back a traffic policeman. He took one look and went to the telephone. An ambulance arrived shortly afterward. Elwell was taken to Bellevue Hospital. He died there two hours later, without regaining consciousness.

Here was news. The Republicans, in convention assembled, were busy in the back room of a Chicago hotel nominating Warren Gamaliel Harding for the presidency, and that reverberant bit of business had first call. But Joseph Bowne Elwell was a man of standing, and, among a large group of people throughout the United States, a figure of remote dignity.

He had begun his active life humbly enough as a hardware salesman in Brooklyn. But from his early youth he had been attracted to cards. It was, perhaps, the passion of an ordinary gambler, but he had chosen for his activities the aristocratic game of bridge whist. He found plenty of opportunities to play it in the clubs throughout the city, and by the time he was in his middle twenties he had become so expert that he was able to play for high stakes. Soon his friends were asking him to teach them the fine points of the game. And when, with the end of the twelve-course dinner as an institution, society began to turn seriously to bridge as an evening pastime, he came to be in demand as a teacher.

In 1904 he married a young widow. By this time his name was beginning to mean something. His precepts were widely quoted among bridge players. His wife proved of considerable aid to him. He was not a man

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of great education but, with her help, he was able to write several books on the subject, all of which gained wide circulation. Thus he became a national figure. Many bridge whist experts have arisen in his wake until now the game is a veritable battleground for rival "systems." But Elwell was the first, and, therefore, probably the most impressive. When a bullet ended his life it was, to his followers, as though Solon himself had been slain in the streets of Athens.

The police were on the scene while Elwell still writhed on a hospital cot. They went about their business systematically. They found the bullet that had caused his death—on a table in the center of the room, where it had ricocheted from the plaster wall after passing through his head. It had been fired from a .45 caliber army revolver. The revolver was not to be found. Tracing it was an impossibility. The army had had too many such revolvers. On the mantel was the burnt-out stub of a cheap cigarette. It was obviously not Elwell's, for no others like it were found in the house. Arresting all the smokers of cheap cigarettes was out of the question.

The only window in the room was locked and barred. So were all the others in the house, with the exception of one in Elwell's bedroom which could have been reached only with a ladder. There was no ladder. There were three doors. The rear door was securely locked and had not been tampered with. A basement entrance in the front opened only from an iron gate which was rusted tight. The front door had been locked when Mrs. Larsen arrived. It was, however, the only one that had been used for days.

If the murderer had used it as an entrance, when had he done so? The mail which Elwell had been reading and which, incidentally, offered no clue, had been delivered at seven ten, according to the postman. Mrs. Larsen had entered at eight ten. In the hour that had elapsed 70th Street had been well populated with men and women on their way to work and children bound for school. None ever was found who had seen anyone entering or leaving the Elwell house.

The police made their systematic way upstairs. On the third floor, in the rear, they found Elwell's bedroom. It was evident that the bridge expert had had a restless night. The satin spread of the canopied bed had been turned back, but the covers were undisturbed. The pillow was indented. It was evident that he had merely sprawled on the bed for what sleep he had had. But the hu-

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midity of the June night might have accounted for that.

His dress clothes had been thrown carelessly onto a chair. On a couch there lay, so plainly that anyone who entered the room might have seen them, about four hundred dollars in bills, a watch, and jewelry worth several thousand dollars. It was undisturbed. So, for that matter, was everything else of any value in the house. Nothing was missing that might have been turned to money.

Methodically, the police moved on. They passed through an improvised bar and into the adjoining room, front. And there they found that which implanted the case upon the first page, not to be budged therefrom for many lurid days. It was a bedroom furnished, obviously, for a woman. There was a sort of Oriental splendor about it. On the dressing table were all the powders and unguents that are the modern feminine complexion. In the closet were filmy feminine garments—lingerie, pink pajamas, negligee, boudoir cap, slippers.

"Cherchez la femme!" said the world at large, and the echo came back in headlines of every size.

In the twinkling of a winking eye Elwell, the lawgiver, was forgotten. Solon became Don Juan. What might once have been whispered was shouted now. It was something about which a sophisticated New York could talk without blushes. The last remnants of Victorian reticence had gone away to the recent war and never come back.

Prying eyes soon read the story. When prosperity had come Elwell's way, when fees from pupils had reached twenty thousand dollars a year, royalties from books had added another ten thousand dollars, tips from Wall Street brokers and winnings from his own racing stable had brought increased wealth, his life had changed. He had tired of his wife and his son. He walked out of the house one day and did not return, although he continued to provide for them.

It wasn't long before he was an expert in more than bridge. Celebrity apparently had brought women into his life by the score. There were the ladies who had been driven to bridge by boredom, and they came from Park Avenue as well as Broadway. There were the women who followed the racetracks and expected to be followed by its habitués. There were the girls who smiled at him from nightclub tables when they saw that he was a good spender. In his desk the police found a list of feminine names that would have done credit to Solomon. But Solomon, after all, had been a stickler for the

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benefit of clergy and didn't have to bother with these many telephone numbers.

It was the persistent cry of *"Cherchez la femme!"* from without that drove the police into their almost ludicrous pursuit of all these feminine ghosts of a dead life. Least important was the one to whom they turned first, the one woman who had held a real place in Elwell's life. Mrs. Elwell, now removed from the scene by legal separation, had no trouble in clearing herself. To begin with she had a clear alibi. Not only that, she proved with complete satisfaction that she had been quite content to leave the bridge expert alone and to have no more of him. She was entirely out of his life—and out of his death, too.

But if she was the first woman in Elwell's life, who had been the last? The last with whom he had been seen was Miss Viola Kraus, a divorcée of only a day. He had spent the evening before his death with her. But not in the house in which he met his death. In celebration of her divorce from Victor von Schlegell he had taken Miss Kraus to dinner at the Ritz-Carlton. They had been accompanied by Miss Kraus's sister, Mrs. Walter Lewisohn, and Mr. Lewisohn. While they were dining, Mr. Von Schlegell and his fiancée, for he had lost no time, came in. He and his so recent wife nodded genially.

After dinner Elwell, Miss Kraus, and the Lewisohns had gone to the Midnight Frolic on the roof of the New Amsterdam Theater, where they were joined by Octavio Figueroa, a South American newspaper man. There again they encountered Miss Kraus's former husband and his fiancée, but the meeting was entirely pleasant. At about two o'clock Elwell left the roof with the others. In front of the theater Miss Kraus, the Lewisohns, and Figueroa entered a taxicab. They had expected Elwell to get in, too, but he told them it was too crowded, waved them goodbye, closed the door, and started toward Eighth Avenue.

There were a dozen reports on the heels of the news of the murder that he had been seen with various women on that last night of his life. But against these there was the evidence of Edgar Walters, a taxi driver, that he had picked up Elwell at Eighth Avenue and 42nd Street and had driven him to his home with only one stop. That was at a newsstand where his fare bought a morning newspaper. The taxi driver saw Elwell enter his home at two thirty in the morning.

Miss Kraus had gone directly home from the theater. She had called Elwell from her home to

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be sure that he wasn't angry because he had had to go home alone. She had gone to bed. There was the testimony of her sister and of the servants in undeniable support of her story.

But what of the other women whose names and whose rather intimate effects were to be found on the premises? Edward Rhodes, the bridge expert's chauffeur, told the police that at least seven of them had keys to the house. Who were they? He did not know. But before the police had had time to try to track them down Mrs. Larsen revealed the fact that none of these seven keys would have given any of them entrance on the night of the crime. A week before, Elwell had had the lock changed. The new one had only two keys. One had let Mrs. Larsen into the house that early morning. The other was in Elwell's pocket.

These seven, then, might be eliminated. But there was "a girl in gray" who had come to lunch only a few days before the murder. Elwell had been very mysterious about her. He had told Mrs. Larsen that he would answer the bell himself when it rang. He had told her, too, that he himself would serve the lunch and that she was to leave it at the door to the dining room. He had taken particular pains to see that his guest's identity was a complete secret. It still remains as deep a secret.

There was also a countess, no less. The story was that Elwell, a secret government agent during the war, had suspected the lady's husband of being a spy and had so informed his superiors and that there had been threats against his life as a result. But when the businesslike police looked into all this it turned out to be little more than whispered gossip. Even had the glamorous and slightly sinister story been true it could not have been connected with the crime at hand. The lady and her count were able to provide the police with complete detail regarding their whereabouts on the morning of June 11th and vanished again into the vaporous background from which they had emerged in the whispers of the overzealous.

There was the fashionable matron, whose bridge lessons, according to the gossips, had ripened into unrequited love. It was said that she had looked with eyes of green upon any partner to whom Elwell had said more than was absolutely necessary in the playing of a hand. But this, it turned out, was little more than imagination on the part of those partners. The matron herself demonstrated, to the satisfaction of the detectives, that she had had little part in Elwell's life and, what was more to the

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point, she was able to prove that she had no part in his death.

Then there was Annie. Among the papers in Elwell's desk the police found a note from her. It was from a racing town in Kentucky where Elwell, not long before, had spent three weeks with his horses. It was a pathetic little note. Annie was in trouble and she begged Elwell to help her.

The inference, to anyone with an imagination, was clear. And the theory was that Annie herself, or perhaps her father or her brother, with true Southern chivalry had come "no'th" to avenge a crime against Southern virtue. While newspaper men were elaborating on these possibilities the police were investigating them. A detective found Annie in her old Kentucky home. Her troubles had been financial. She had met Elwell at the racetrack. She knew he was wealthy and she had appealed to him for wealth. She and her menfolk had not ventured out of their home town for months. Elwell had been killed with an army pistol at a range of three feet and not with a Big Bertha from a distance of more than a thousand miles.

And so the phantoms came and vanished. As you may see, they were the creatures, largely, of whispers. With the tramping of heavy feet the police followed each one of them into the mist, for it was their duty. But the matter-of-fact men whose business it is to deal with the practicalities of crime probably knew from the start that their quest was more than likely to be in vain. The chances were one in a hundred that a woman had killed Elwell. In the first place the pistol from which a bullet had sped into his brain was of the murderer's own selection, for there had never been a weapon in Elwell's house, and it was of the sort that a woman would not have been likely to choose. It was heavy and cumbersome. It would have taken an Amazon to manipulate it. And only an experienced sportswoman, accustomed to the use of such firearms, could have withstood its "kick."

Then, too, if a woman had killed him it was more than likely that it would have been one he had entertained or at least given entrance to the house. But Elwell was found without his toupee and his false teeth. His vanity had been such that not even his men friends had known he used either. It is unreasonable to believe that he would have admitted a woman to his presence while he was bald and toothless.

But there was that one chance in a hundred and the police could not afford to ignore it, especially when the world with-

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out clamored for a sordidly romantic solution. They questioned literally dozens of women whose names had been found in Elwell's papers or had been brought into the case by gossip that was often irresponsible. They pursued them from Palm Beach to Narragansett Pier. They forgot improbabilities and considered possibilities. In the end each lady in her turn proved not only disinterest and disinclination but an actual alibi.

But when the police turned to the realms of reality they found phantoms, too. If it was a man who had killed Elwell, who was he and where was he? Here the heavy feet were on surer ground but it led nowhere. There were many men with whom Elwell had had contacts of one sort or another. Almost without exception they were sought out. Detectives started with the letter that lay open on Elwell's lap when he was found just this side of death. It was from Lloyd Gentry, who was in charge of the bridge expert's stable of racehorses. Had it contained information that another might have sought to prevent reaching Elwell? It had not. It was as dull a business letter as anyone ever read.

But in the field of racing there is an undesirable element. It is no longer entirely the sport of kings. At certain tracks it has fallen into the hands of gamblers and crooks who are not content to take their chances with the honest competition of thoroughbreds. Had a group of these men tried to lure Elwell into their schemes? Had he threatened to expose them? Had he double-crossed them?

Detectives conferred with Gentry and with Walter Pendleton, Elwell's partner in his racing venture. Neither knew of any such entanglement. For months detectives frequented the leading racetracks of the country, the tracks on which Elwell's horses had run. They listened in the stands, in the betting ring, in the paddock for an unguarded remark that might have provided a clue. They heard nothing.

The men of Elwell's household were two. Edward Rhodes, his chauffeur, had been more than eager, from newspaper accounts at least, to discuss the private affairs of his employer. But in these he had had no part, except as an interested onlooker with a good memory. It was a simple matter to check up on his activities on the night of June 10th. They were entirely innocent.

William H. Barnes, an elderly Englishman who had served as secretary and business manager to the bridge expert, was less eager to discuss Elwell's life as he knew it. His

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attitude was understandable. He had been employed in a confidential capacity. But when the police assured him that what he told them would go no further he became completely frank. Not only was he able to exonerate himself completely but he was unable to find anything in Elwell's financial affairs that could be taken as a clue. The slain man had plenty of money and paid his debts promptly. He had never been known as a welcher. Nor had he any outstanding credits that might have led to murder for gain.

Mrs. Larsen's husband was questioned. He was an ex-soldier and the murder weapon was an army pistol. It was possible, of course, that to shield someone Mrs. Larsen, finding the revolver, had hidden it. As a matter of fact she did try to hide some of the lingerie later found in the guest bedroom but her motives proved to be those of protection for her dead employer's name rather than for any possible murderer. Mrs. Larsen's husband owned no gun. His alibi was clear. He wasn't even questioned a second time.

Still searching for a motive, the police turned to jealousy. With so many women in his life it seemed quite probable that Elwell might have provoked the enmity of a rival suitor or a husband. "Bridge widowers," as the husbands of wives with whom the game becomes a passion to the exclusion of all else are known, seldom are killers. It would have to be deeper than that. Jealousy, as a motive for murder, needs a more erotic background than the green baize table. It takes four to play bridge whist and, if you remember your adages, two are company and even three are a crowd.

But there was Victor von Schlegell, the divorced husband of the lady with whom Elwell spent his last night of life. The police found him more than eager to account for all his actions. He had left the roof garden shortly after Elwell and Miss Kraus had left, and if he had given any thought to his former wife it was one of satisfaction at the idea that she, too, had come out of their domestic entanglement happy and able to have a good time. He liked Elwell and respected him. He himself had no reason to be jealous of a former wife. He was himself planning to remarry at the earliest possible moment and he was with his fiancée.

He took the lady to her home and went to his. She came to his apartment the next morning for breakfast, for they intended that day to drive to Atlantic City. She arrived shortly after seven o'clock, they had breakfast, he walked to a garage several blocks away to get his car,

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arriving there at eight o'clock. The hour in which Elwell's murderer was free to enter and leave the house on 70th Street was completely accounted for. While Mrs. Larsen was sniffing powder smoke at a few minutes after eight o'clock Von Schlegell was halfway across the island.

There were the usual stories of involved "plots," too, as the story made its last desperate effort to hold the first page. Bridge whist had not yet become so vituperative a battleground that the adherents of a rival system could be blamed. It is quite possible that today if Ely Culbertson were to come to an untimely end, Sidney Lenz might have a great deal of explaining to do. Or vice versa. No such situation existed in the naïve days of 1920.

But prohibition was new then. It had not yet become a big business, with its murders neatly arranged and carried out with precision and dispatch. Gangs were beginning to form to take over the industry, and now and again one of their members was found, lifeless, with a death wound that could not possibly have come from a sip of his own poisonous wares. Had Elwell ventured into this new and fruitful field and become a victim of the uncouth element with whom he came in competition? It was a theory, and any theory was tenable for one edition. But the police never found any liquid evidence of its truth beyond the few bottles of whisky and liqueurs that stocked the private bar in the murdered man's apartments.

At last the police came back to the convenient motive of robbery. Perhaps they had held to it all the way through their investigation. If so, it must at least be said that they were open-minded with regard to the other possibilities. Seldom have they so painstakingly followed every possible clue to a murder to its bitter and futile end. In few cases have they questioned so conscientiously every person with whom a murder victim has had a contact which might have led, by no matter how devious a route, to the scene of his death.

From the start there were numerous bits of evidence which pointed to the possibility that a sneak thief had killed an intended robbery victim. To begin with there was the medical evidence with regard to the bullet wound. The bullet had emerged from Elwell's head almost an inch above the point at which it entered. Its course, then, had been upward, which meant that it had been fired from an angle below the head.

Almost opposite the chair in which Elwell was found dying was another chair. It was large

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enough to conceal a crouching figure. It was possible that a thief, hearing someone coming, had slipped behind the chair. A shot fired from that position would have taken an upward course. But why would a thief have fired if he had not been discovered? And, if he had been discovered, why would he have remained in his crouching position to shoot down his victim?

Then, too, how did he enter the house? The police point out that there are sneak thieves who steal mail and rifle it. One of these might have gone to the door of the Elwell house after the postman had left the letters, might have hidden in the lobby when he saw that Elwell was reaching for the mail and then, catching the door before it swung back to lock, had followed him into the house.

But if he followed at such close proximity to Elwell why was he not seen? Or, not being seen, how did he get into the same room with Elwell, make his way across it, and hide behind a chair? Or if he did not do that but faced his victim with his pistol, why did he crouch or squat to fire the shot that ended his victim's life?

If the murderer was a mail thief and shot Elwell only after he was discovered by him, and possibly threatened by him, it is not difficult to understand why he did not search the house and discover the money and jewelry in Elwell's room. But why, at least, did he not take that which he wanted in the first place? The mail that had just been delivered, only one letter of which Elwell had opened, lay at his victim's feet. He had to pass it to leave the room. He could have picked it up on his way out. If he had killed because of it he certainly would have taken it.

There is as much at fault with the theory as with any of the others. The police, of course, need never expect an imaginative public to accept it, even though in their own minds it is the solution. It is not romantic enough. Even a bridge partner whose ace had been trumped would have been a more acceptable figure in the public mind. But that would not have explained the lingerie in the guest room, which, more than anything else in the case, had caught the impish fancy of the men and women in the street outside the drab old house that had now become sinister.

"Cherchez la femme!" will echo every time the murder of Joseph Bowne Elwell is mentioned. And the fact that she will never be found will not still the whispers.

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FICTION

The Bay Side of Neptune Street

by Leslie Alan Horvitz

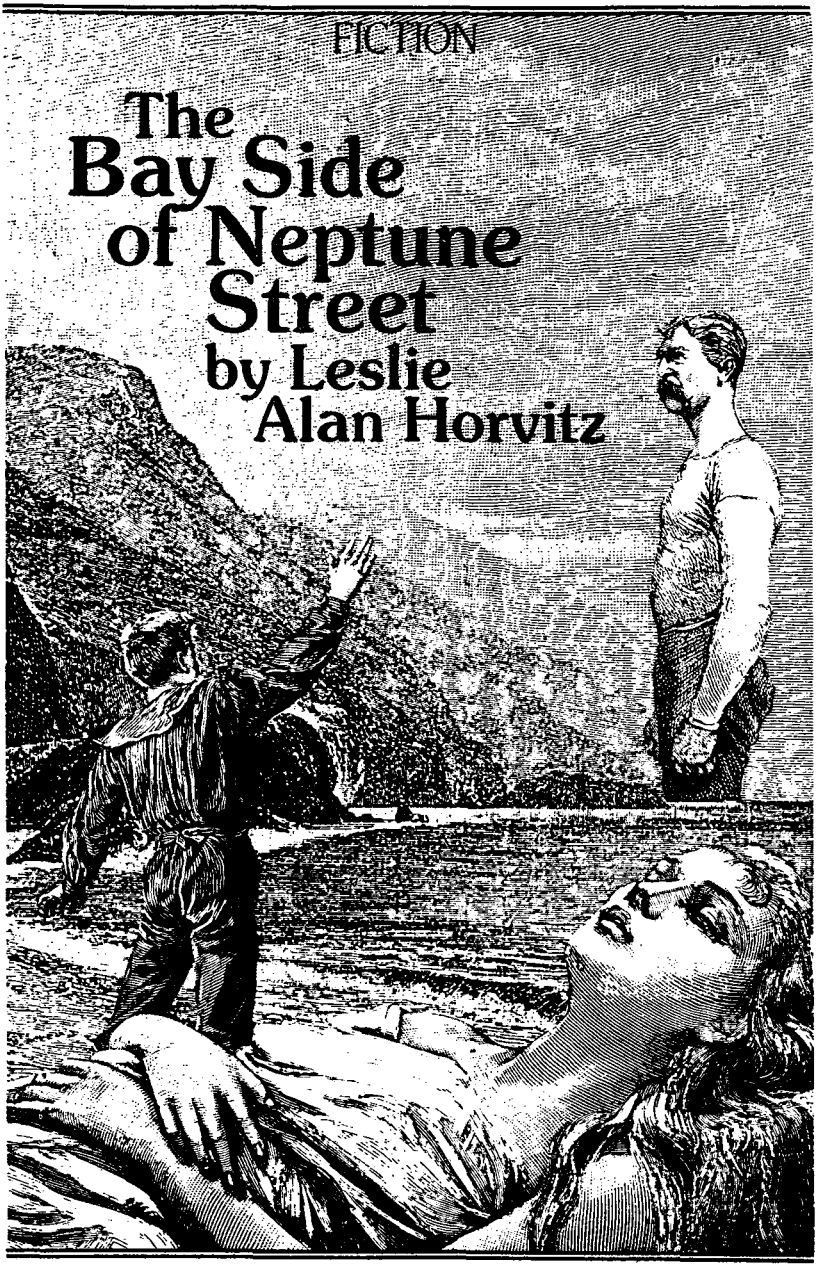


Illustration by Marc Yankus

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"Rien n'est mort que ce qui n'existe pas encore"
(Nothing is dead but what has never been)
Apollinaire

SIXISH

Later, when the summer was over, and we could sit down and piece together what had happened, we realized that the conclusions we'd reached were wrong, or right but for the wrong reasons, that our perceptions had been distorted by what we'd wanted to see, and that for the most part, we'd been hunting for answers in places that had no answers to give us.

It was late in June when I moved into the house on Neptune Street in the township of Harbor Light. The word street conveys the idea of a thoroughfare for vehicular traffic, but nothing could be further from the truth. Neptune Street was more like a walkway. There were no streets as such on Meridian Island; there weren't any vehicles to speak of, except for police vans, firetrucks, and ambulances. Only at the far west of the island, where a public beach was attainable by causeway, were cars permitted. Everywhere else they were banned.

That wasn't all that was banned on Meridian Island. Eating and drinking and sleeping and disrobing on the beach were banned as well. The councils administering the various townships were very strict when it came to enforcing these ordinances. The year before my arrival, a couple were arrested, convicted, and fined for the crime of consuming vanilla ice cream in public. Ironically, Meridian Island also held a reputation as a place where one could go to indulge in a bewildering variety of illicit drugs and an equally bewildering variety of sexual practices that might be frowned upon on the mainland. It was a wonder sometimes, what with all the frenetic dissipating that went on, that people managed to survive long enough to greet the first cool nights of fall.

While Meridian Island, from its most easterly point to its most westerly, covered a distance of over thirty miles, it was in essence little more than a sandbar which, from the bay side to the ocean side, could be traversed on foot in five minutes. I'd heard stories that the great hurricane of 1936 had scooped up several houses by the ocean and dropped them in a heap by the bay. The owners, resigned to the whim of the wind, if not to fate, had decided

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to rebuild in the new location. Whether such stories are apocryphal or not is immaterial; they illustrate how narrow the island is, and how fragile; I one day expect to see it disappear in another powerful storm, never to surface again.

The house I occupied was situated on the bay side; it was a modest-sized two story wood-frame structure, with weather-beaten shingles and doors that seemed never to close quite properly. It was not that I could afford the rental on a summer house—many of these houses cost fifteen to twenty thousand dollars for the season—but rather that I had a friend who had gone off to Europe for the summer and needed somebody to house-sit for him.

The first time I saw Lise Cummings, I was sitting alone in the upstairs bedroom. Looking out of the window, you could see onto the back deck of the house across the yard. This was a much larger, more rambling house than the one I was staying in. I later was to learn that it had been designed by the same architect who'd originally drawn up the plans for a large metropolitan airport. Knowing this, I could begin to appreciate the way it was constructed, with the main body of the house proliferating out into three separate wings, each with its own bedroom and bathroom. In addition, fronting the other side of the deck, there was a small guesthouse, with yet another bedroom and bathroom. The whole effect was of a terminal building if you looked at it in the right way.

In the evenings, up until midnight, the lights always seemed to be blazing in the windows. I'd hear laughter and voices, sometimes of a man and woman, sometimes of several people. Always it seemed to me the people in this house sounded happy. They know how to live over there, I decided. Very late, when all the lights went off, I became more aware of the device they'd installed in their yard to ensnare any mosquitoes that flew too close to it. There'd be a flicker of light and an electric crackle that signaled the quick end of another insect. As June had been particularly wet that year, more mosquitoes than ever had been spawned, so there was a great deal of crackling going on every night.

My purpose in settling on Meridian for the summer was to find for myself the solitude I thought necessary for the work I was doing. This work entailed a considerable amount of research on behalf of a rather important writer whose name I'd prefer not to mention here. He was writing a novel, but one that required him to have a large body of facts at his dis-

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posal. It was my job to collect these facts and gather them into a coherent form.

My European-bound friend had been quick to assure me that Harbor Light, unlike many of the more celebrated and popular townships on Meridian Island, was a tranquil place, a family place, where all-night parties were frowned upon and group shares were—at least in theory—against the law. I should have no problem, he said, getting my work done in time for my September fifteenth deadline. With one grocery store, one liquor store, and one real estate office that I never saw actually open for business, Harbor Light was not exactly rich in distractions; in short, I could expect only peace and quiet.

One thing I did not get that summer in Harbor Light was peace and quiet. On the other hand, maybe that wasn't what I had been hoping for to begin with.

I had no idea who Lise Cummings was when I first spied her. I was too unfamiliar with the residents of Harbor Light after a week's time to know who anybody was; I recognized a few faces, to be sure, but that was all.

The first thing that struck me about her was not how pretty she was—for she was that, all right, pretty, not stunning or beautiful, but pretty in the great American tradition of the girl next door—but how interesting she looked. Something about her eyes, or her laughter, which was high and infectious, or the way her hair seemed to turn red in the direct rays of the sun, then blonde once she'd retreated to the shade. But my initial impression was that this was someone I might like to get to know.

She was wearing a white ankle-length beach robe when I saw her that first late afternoon. It looked diaphanous; depending on the angle of the sun and her position on the deck, her body, a tantalizing silhouette, appeared to be altogether visible through it. But from the distance of my bedroom window I could not be entirely sure.

A minute or so after she appeared, the screen door to her house opened and a little girl emerged. She walked clumsily as if each new step was something of an experiment, as perhaps it was. She must not have been more than two years old. She had short, unruly blonde hair and a doll-like face with a button nose.

"Mommy!" she cried out, hurrying to the woman in the beach robe.

The little girl was naked, and when her mother picked her up, and hugged her, there was a blending of blonde hair, one

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head more golden than the other. "Come on, sweetheart," the woman said, "we have to get you a bath."

And then they went inside. The screen door snapping shut in the silence of the afternoon sounded unusually loud, like a gunshot.

There was a father, a husband, and his name was Sean Cummings, and I saw him soon afterward. I'd wager anything it was from him that the little girl, whose name was Hillary, inherited her blonde hair, for his was a great deal lighter than his wife's. He was tall, strapping, probably in his early thirties, and possessed of an athletic build that cried out for him to become a tennis pro. While he was no pro, he did in fact play a lot of tennis at the courts located at the end of Harbor Light, just before the township of Canticle.

I was given to taking long walks down the beach. When I came to a point in my work when the words began to blur on the page, I would close my books and set out in an attempt to clear my head. Sometimes these walks would take me much farther than I'd planned, which was how I happened to be in Aerie, a township five miles to the east of Harbor Light, not many days after I'd had my first glimpse of the entire Cummings family (husband, wife, daughter) dining leisurely on the deck under a soft evening sky.

Aerie was a much wilder community than Harbor Light. It was largely homosexual, although its reputation for excitement and for illicit and perverse pleasures had, not unexpectedly, drawn a great number of heterosexuals as well. And while nudity had been ruled out of bounds farther to the west, no such constraints obtained here. The Aerie beach presented a lavish spectacle of tanned and oiled flesh. Occasionally you would come on couples clutched in such a passionately oblivious embrace it was all you could do to avoid staring. But you forced yourself and didn't stare. The idea in Aerie was that everyone was entitled to do whatever they liked.

The police would arrest you, though, if you were seen carrying an open beer can in the streets of the township, and then make you pay a fifty dollar fine.

Thirsty after my long trek to this place, I discovered a bar that was really a succession of bars deployed in the setting of an enormous complex that included a discotheque, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a locker room, a boutique, and a restaurant. This complex went by the name of the Rock Candy

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and at all times of the day and night it was filled with the thunder of endless disco hits: Kool and the Gang, Aretha Franklin, Howard Johnson, Steve Miller, Hall and Oates, Stevie Wonder, Rolls Royce, Chaka Khan, and the Human League's lament, "Don't You Want Me, Baby?"

Taking a seat at one of the bars, I found myself looking over at a man so familiar that I was sure I knew him from someplace. The way he regarded me suggested the same, but it took me a moment longer before I realized it was Sean. With him was a woman, with her black hair knitted seductively into braids, wearing an off-shoulder pink shirt that hung down to just below her waist. She was remarkably attractive, and the way she behaved with him, touching him at every opportunity, pressing her bare legs against his, gave me the impression they must be lovers.

They talked quietly for several minutes. Then, draining all that remained in their glasses, they got up from their seats and strolled, arm in arm, towards the exit.

I didn't feel right staying where I was, but I didn't wish to leave too quickly lest I run into them again.

The only way to get to Aerie—the only way to get anywhere on the island except for walking—was to take a lateral ferry, really a water taxi service. You had to telephone for a reservation. I suspected that Sean felt no hesitation about carrying on an affair in Aerie, even in broad daylight, since it was so far away from Harbor Light. People had a tendency to stay put on Meridian Island save for weekend nights, when couples would journey to Aerie or The Eves or Sea Gate for the entertainment they could not find at home.

By chance, it was only a day later, at the liquor store, when I ran into Lise and her daughter, whose lips were smeared with the chocolate ice cream she was trying to consume. We smiled at each other, but it was she who spoke first. "Don't you live in Jason's house?"

I admitted that I did.

She explained that she was a friend of Jason's—"a summer friend," she laughed, "but a friend just the same"—and she'd been wondering what had happened to him.

When I told her he was on tour for the summer in Europe, she nodded with satisfaction. "We have to go now, but why don't you stop by sometime? We'll have some tea and talk."

I assumed she was just being polite, but this turned out not to be the case. Spying me a couple of days later, as I was on my way down Neptune Street to-

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wards the beach and she was coming from the opposite direction, she greeted me like an old friend. "You don't look exactly dressed for the beach."

"Just going for a short walk. I have to get back to work soon."

"Work? You work out here?"

The notion struck her as somewhat improbable. Even when I told her what it was I did, she seemed just the slightest bit puzzled. "I've never met a researcher before. Well, if you can spare a few minutes around sixish, we're having cocktails, come over."

Around six I was up in my bedroom watching the preparations for cocktails getting under way on the back deck. That was one of the advantages of having the house I did; I decided I would see what the company was like before I made up my mind whether to accept the invitation.

For several minutes the only ones in view were Lise and Hillary. But after a while other people began to drift in, some very elegantly, and very seductively, attired, others in whatever they'd worn to the beach. Of the new arrivals none caught my attention more than one woman who came dressed in a stunning sleeveless dress of black. It was the woman I'd seen at the Rock Candy with Sean. What was this? I wondered. I put aside my work and went over to join the party.

Sean didn't show up until later. He'd been playing tennis and said he'd lost track of the time. Still in his whites, he excused himself and went upstairs to shower.

Lise was the perfect hostess. There still weren't so many people collected out on the deck as to make introductions out of the question.

The woman in the black dress was the one I especially wanted to meet. Her name, it turned out, was Kathy Barnes. Her hair was no longer in braids, but rather fell straight over her shoulders. "How do you know Lise?" she said.

"I don't."

"Ah," she said. She seemed to examine me more carefully. "You were at the Rock Candy the other day, weren't you? At the bar?"

If I listened hard, I could hear the shower Sean was taking upstairs; the bathroom window overlooked the deck.

I told her that I was.

"I guess then you know more than you probably should." But she didn't sound very concerned. I realized that I could like her without much difficulty.

"You'll find I'm very discreet."

What a way to start off a new acquaintance, I thought.

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Having not so much as exchanged more than a couple of words with either Lise or this woman, I probably had more insight as to what was going on between them than many of their close friends. Which was not to say that it wasn't awkward even so.

Sean, when he finally got down, welcomed me cordially, but there was nothing about the way he acted to indicate he remembered me from Aerie. I noticed that he treated Kathy like his other guests, possibly even with added reserve, and for the duration of the cocktail party, he seemed to do his best to avoid her. No question that their affair was meant to be a secret.

It was Kathy who told me that Sean was independently wealthy, that if I went inside the house I would see in the living room the home computer terminal he used to make the stock market transactions that provided him with all the money he needed to support himself and his family. She told me also that Sean and Lise had been married for a little over three years and that they spent most of the year on the island, abandoning it only when it became particularly bleak and desolate in wintertime.

Kathy herself was a graphic artist, "temporarily out of work," as she put it. "I was let go in May and I figured what do I need to work in the summer for? I've got enough money squirreled away. In September I'll start looking again."

Although I thought I might be getting on treacherous ground, I asked her how she'd come to meet Lise and Sean.

"I knew Lise first. I met her one night at Marietta's over in Sea Gate. We were both by ourselves. It was something that just clicked, you know." She paused, uncertain as to what she should say next. "Believe me, what happened between Sean and myself took us both by surprise. We didn't want to do anything to hurt Lise. She's such a warm and affectionate — and trusting—woman. How all this will end, I'll be damned if I know."

In the days that followed I began to pay frequent calls on the Cummingses, perhaps because it seemed such a hotbed of excitement compared to the quiet existence I was leading. There was always the expectation that something might happen, although I witnessed no dramas, no eruptions, nothing but warm, relaxed domesticity. Sean and Lise appeared to get along wonderfully; they joked continuously, laughed easily, and seemed never to argue. If a child could be considered a barometer of

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the prevailing emotional currents in the air, then Hillary was the best evidence Sean and Lise had to put forward. I don't remember seeing a happier little girl in my life.

So naturally it was difficult to remember that Sean was having an affair with Kathy. At times I thought it might be over, that it had withered and died. I have to admit I was hoping it had, and not just for the sake of the Cummingses' marriage.

I liked Lise a great deal, and I did not want to see her hurt. I had also befriended Hillary, and I'd begun to feel, after a while, that I was a part of the family.

Sean, on the other hand, I was not prepared to like. He seemed too much the golden boy, for whom money and women came too easily. But in fact, there was a serious, penetrating intelligence at work behind the frivolous image he presented to the world.

"It's necessary to live intensely, I think, to go to the limits of things," he told me. "This is only a phase of my life." By this I assumed he meant his family, this rambling summer house, the involvement he had with the stock market. "One day what I am going to have to do is to pick myself up and put myself in a situation I might not be able to handle."

"What do you mean, like crossing the Sahara on camelback?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. An Arctic expedition. I've done things, I've climbed mountains in Switzerland and gone down rapids. I've done skydiving, maybe half a dozen times. But even jumping out of a plane at twenty thousand feet isn't enough."

Another time he told me, "I think sometimes that no matter what people do, if they take it far enough, I mean really far, they have a chance of ending up at the same point. It might not matter then, you see, whether someone's a mystic, a saint, or a junkie. Or an artist or a criminal. If somehow you manage to reach the extreme end of an extreme way of life, who knows what you'll discover when you get there?"

I was intrigued by this notion, but at the same time thought it bizarre, considering its implications. "Would you say that if you murdered someone—or murdered several people, even several million, like Hitler or Stalin—that would get you to the same place St. Francis of Assisi and Nietzsche reached, just to name two who certainly went to extremes?"

Sean smiled sheepishly, saying, "Maybe, maybe not. I never said that this place you could reach was necessarily positive.

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I'm not even saying this place has a geographical location. It's all in here." He tapped his temple with his fingers.

"You're suggesting you wouldn't have to conquer the Sahara or the Arctic then, all you'd have to do is something so radical and out of character here and now that you might get to the same destination."

He nodded enthusiastically, heartened that I had understood his point. "Exactly," he said. "Exactly, exactly."

It was not Sean's philosophy that caused me to change my mind about him, however.

One morning, before the mist along the bay had thoroughly dissolved, I came upon him with his daughter. They were walking hand in hand, and they were engaged in what, from a distance, sounded like a very serious conversation.

I was several paces behind them when Sean suddenly stopped and put a finger to his lips. "Shhh," he said. He pointed towards the small overgrown lot off to the left of Neptune Street. A house had probably been there once, but it was gone now and all that was left were berry bushes, wild shrubbery, and an abundance of grass.

Sean guided Hillary into the field. "Be very quiet," he whispered to her.

She didn't seem to know what all this fuss was about. On the other hand, neither did I. I followed, making sure not to be heard, either.

A girl on a bicycle sped by, gave a cursory glance at the two of them, and went on. Whatever had caught Sean's attention was not so obvious as all that.

When I got closer, I saw that they were both deep in the grass. Sean was up to his knees, and Hillary was practically submerged to her head of blonde hair. Only when I looked farther ahead did I notice what had them enthralled.

Two young does, with legs thin as wishbones, stood opposite them, munching lazily on the berry bushes. Their big liquid eyes took in the human observers, but they evinced no fear, and went right on filling their stomachs. The bushes behind them crackled with movement, and soon the mother came into view, barely visible amid the foliage. She proceeded out into the clearing, perhaps to get a better view of the man and the little girl.

Hillary squealed with delight, but even this outburst failed to evoke a response from the deer.

Sean and Hillary were emboldened to approach further; there couldn't have been more than twelve feet separating them from the does by this time. I expected at any moment to see the deer bolt in panic. But

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nothing happened: the tableau remained in place. The rest of the world, meanwhile, went obliviously by: the bicyclists jangling their bicycle bells, the girls in T-shirts and cutoffs loudly exchanging gossip, the men walking their Scotch terriers, the morning New York *Times* clasped securely under their arms. It was remarkable how no one expressed the slightest interest in why three people were standing there in a lot staring intently into the bushes.

Then, slowly, the does drew back from the berries and loped over the low-lying bushes back to where they could not be seen. The mother gave Sean and Hillary a last appraising look and was gone, too. But there was no haste to their movements, no fear; it was just that the time had come for them to go elsewhere.

"It was magic, Daddy," Hillary said in hushed tones.

Sean took her up into his arms and held her close. "Yes, sweetheart, it was magic and you must always remember that's what really counts in life, the magic. We just had a magic moment, one just for us."

"And will there be more?"

"Oh yes," he answered her, "many, many, many more."

Their magic had nothing to do with mine, and I withdrew as quietly as I had come so they wouldn't see me.

I believe it was then that I changed my mind about Sean. And for all I know, the magic might not have been just a figure of speech. For I never saw the deer on the island again.

A few days later—a Friday as it happened—I turned up at the Cummingses' to find only Sean at home. "Listen," he said as soon as I entered, "are you doing anything later tonight? We're all going down to Aerie to do some partying. It's rare that Lise gets out. She's one of those incurable homebodies. I'm lucky if I can drag her to a movie in Sea Gate."

I was agreeable to the idea. I had not only grown attached to Sean and Lise, but also to their friends. And they had many friends, they had the knack—some would call it an art—of drawing new people into their circle and those whom they recruited felt in some way blessed, among the elect. A hard core could always be counted on to appear on almost any pretext, tea, wine tasting, dinner, a marshmallow roast, anything at all really; then there was a peripheral circle whose constituents changed so frequently I could never keep track of them.

Curiously, it was Sean who was responsible for gathering in most of these people. Even those whom Lise had be-

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friended confessed to knowing her only since she'd gotten married to Sean. No one I ever spoke to had known her from before. But I did not think this a matter of any special significance.

Sean and I retired to the deck to have some piña coladas he'd concocted in his blender. For reasons I never quite divined, piña coladas, like backgammon, were very much in fashion on Meridian Island.

"We don't know each other all that well," he began, his voice suddenly shifting in tone, becoming more confidential, "but I think I owe you an explanation."

I had a feeling as to what was coming, but said nothing.

"You know that Kathy and I have been seeing each other."

I said that I was aware of their relationship.

"I don't regret what happened, I just didn't expect things to develop the way they have. I like her a lot, but it's nothing like what Lise and I have, and I think it's time to end it."

While this declaration prompted an unreasonable hope inside me, I did not let it show. I just asked him whether Kathy had been apprised of his decision. "I think she knows. I haven't exactly come right out and said anything, but she's a clever girl, she's caught on."

It has been my experience that a lot of people do not catch on until you pound them over the head with a sledgehammer, but I would have gained nothing by saying this to him.

Now Sean cocked his head. "Hey, you hear that?" His face lit up. What I heard was a cardinal screaming in the branches of the pines that overshadowed the deck, and the occasional crackle of a mosquito undergoing rapid extinction, but I was certain he was referring to neither of these things. "Come inside, I want to show you something."

It was a clock he wanted me to take a look at, a small round clock of no particular distinction that I could see, which hung on the wall in the living room. Moreover, it told the wrong time. It was ticking loudly, but it would have to do a lot of hard and fast ticking if it expected to get even close to the hour it actually was. Why Sean was smiling was beyond me.

"You see that?"

I nodded.

"It's a very peculiar clock. For days at a time it does nothing. It stays stopped. Then, for some reason, it'll start ticking again. I haven't the faintest idea what sets it going. There, you see, it's stopped now. It's been acting like that since Lise and I moved in here three years ago."

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"Ever think of getting it fixed?"

He looked at me as if I might be mad. "Why would I want to do that? Something has a mystery to it, why go and kill it?"

For their outing, Sean had invited another couple, Ruth and Terry Ryan, whom I'd met on previous occasions, and a man in his late twenties I'd never been introduced to before. He had dark, intense eyes and wore a reddish-brown beard. He had on a khaki jacket of the kind you can purchase in army surplus stores and jeans so worn through I was surprised there weren't more than two holes in them. He presented a considerable contrast to the Ryans, who even when they dressed down managed to look elegant.

"Meet Joe Cassidy," Sean said.

Joe extended his hand, but his grasp was brief and indecisive.

Out of the corner of my eye I observed Lise fortifying the Ryans with cocktails. I could tell from the look she gave Joe Cassidy that she didn't know what to make of him. He was obviously here at Sean's behest.

"Joe is a professional outsider," Sean went on. "But he's also a professional wanderer. He's been everywhere."

Joe remained silent. I asked him where everywhere was exactly.

He shrugged as if it really made no difference. "Afghanistan before the invasion, Iran before the revolution, Lebanon before the civil war, Poland before martial law, Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe. All over."

There was mockery in the way he delivered this.

"And now Meridian Island," I said.

"He's determined to see everything before he dies," Sean explained.

Joe Cassidy did not fit in. He might get his wish and exhaust all the world had to reveal to him, but he would never fit in.

It wasn't until we were about to board the ferry—actually a water taxi—that I had a chance to talk to Lise. Sean was busy conversing with the Ryans, apparently having, temporarily, given up the idea of entertaining Joe, who stood off to one side leaning against the wall of Beckett's Fish Market right next to the landing.

"It's Sean's birthday tomorrow. It's always easy to remember because it's the day before the Fourth. Tonight we celebrate in public. Tomorrow it's just the two of us, our own private celebration."

"He never mentioned it."

"He wouldn't. I think birthdays embarrass him. Not the getting older part of it, just the celebrating part. But I insisted. I told him I'd treat. All he had

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to do was select the guests."

I said I was flattered that he'd chosen me. But why had he chosen Joe Cassidy? He was so sullen he was bound to put a damper on any festivities.

"Beats me," she said, staring at him. "He never says a word when I'm around. I don't even think he particularly likes women. Sean met him on the beach and somehow they struck up a conversation. Sean loves to draw people out. The more introverted and shy they are, the more he works on them. I guess it's a challenge. When he found out Joe had done all this travelling all over the world and had all these adventures, living hand to mouth, selling his blood in Asia, living in ashrams in India, smoking opium in derelict hotels in Kabul, he got awfully excited, almost infatuated. I wouldn't be surprised if Joe was making it all up, if he'd never got farther than Maine. But I've heard him talking to Sean and I'll have to say this for him, he knows how to tell a damn good story—even if he is making it up."

The night was cool, not chilly, the sky teeming with stars and planets: a beautiful night in which to commemorate a new year of life. Sean had brought along a bottle of Chablis, which we opened as soon as we climbed into the rear of the water taxi, and an undisclosed number of joints which had a surprising potency to them. You'd take a couple of hits and decide that the grass was ineffectual, only to realize ten minutes later that you had absolutely no idea where you were or what you'd said a second ago.

As it was a Fourth of July weekend, Aerie teemed with people. There were men dressed like caricatures of cowboys, with wide-brimmed hats, leather vests, mock sixguns resting in holsters strapped by more leather to what were really nothing more than G-strings. There were men all in white with bald heads and men with chains woven about their waists; there were women in knit tops that allowed you to see whatever you'd like to of their breasts; there were women in strapless gowns who would not have looked out of place at the Waldorf. There were drag queens who had gotten down the mannerisms and movements of women so well that they put many of the genuine women to shame. Sometimes you would look out onto the dance floor and be unable to pick out who was male from who was female. It seemed that there were more couples of the same sex than the opposite.

The whole of the Rock Candy discotheque, where we headed as soon as we stepped off the ferry, was surrounded by mir-

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rors that gave you the impression there were far more people in the place than happened to be the case. With the blend of lights and sudden darkness, engineered by unseen technicians, it was often hard to distinguish the reflections from the people responsible for them.

"You loved me once, oh, you could do it again," a woman's voice blasted out of speakers strategically positioned in various corners of the disco. "Love me once, oh, do it again, oh, do it again."

Everywhere I looked I saw people with rapt expressions, dancing in place, dancing alone if no partner was available. Any hint of intelligence, if it had ever been there to begin with, had long since disappeared from their faces.

I lingered at the bar long after the others had left it to dance. Evidently I had been affected by the combination of the weed and the Chablis, for really I found myself paralyzed, dazzled by the lights, by the dancers and the music. Beethoven, Mozart, Hayden, Schubert were who I listened to, not Stevie Wonder and Gloria Gaynor. But in my condition this music held me.

Suddenly I felt someone tug at my hand. I looked and saw that it was Lise. "What are you doing there by yourself? Come dance with me."

She was wearing a dress of bright orange, and when I turned my eyes sometimes it was not she that I saw but the orange of her dress. I would get lost on the dance floor, separated from her, and then looking desperately about, I'd spot the orange and be able to orient myself. I felt very lucky to know her. I think at that moment I was a little bit in love with her myself.

We danced for only one dance, then she deserted me. "I'm hot, aren't you?" she said. "I need a drink." She went back to the bar.

Again I lost track of the group. I wandered off to another part of the disco, and when I came back, no one I knew was visible. I threaded my way through the dancing couples but failed to recognize anyone. A certain panic set in, born of paranoia. I wondered if they'd decided they'd had enough and gone off and left me.

Then Sean was standing in front of me. "There you are," he said. "I've been looking all over for you. Look, Lise and some of the others have gone on to Uncle Peter's Place."

I started to ask what he was talking about when I realized it was another disco, one darker and smaller than the Rock Candy, located a short walk away in a community called Lunar Beach. The disco was,

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besides a single grocery store, the only commercial enterprise operating in Lunar Beach; otherwise it was a cluster of houses whose rustic appearance hinted not at all at their price.

I said I'd had all I wanted of the Rock Candy. Fresh air was what I really craved, but it was very shortly obvious that fresh air was the one thing I had no chance of getting at Uncle Peter's Place.

The boardwalk all the way from Aerie to Lunar Beach trembled with the deafening music spilling over it. Several men, virtually all of them in torn undershirts and jeans, loitered by the entrance. You had to fight your way inside and then struggle further to make it to the bar. Compared to the lighting system at the Rock Candy, the one at Uncle Peter's was rather on the primitive side, with strobe lights yielding to darkness every few moments. In two corners of the room a television screen was mounted; a videotape of some kind of fashion show was being shown on both of them. What relevance the fashion show might have had to the music and the dancing I could not tell.

The whole atmosphere in this cramped disco was one of smoke and sweat and oppressive body heat. But while the music was almost exactly the same as it was in the Rock Candy, here the dancers appeared more energized by it, more determined to put their concentration into it. Several of them seemed to be in a trance as they worked their bodies feverishly, saturating their T-shirts and sweatsuits so totally that they became virtually transparent. On the faces of the women dancing together I noticed sly seductive smiles; in these smiles, in their sinuous movements in the confined space, there was a sense that they shared a joke between them that the outside world would never be privileged enough to know.

Once inside, Sean vanished again, and it was a while before I gained sight of him. But it was not Sean I was interested in. My eyes scanned the dance floor, searching out the flash of orange that would give Lise away.

At last I spied her; her partner was Joe Cassidy. They were both unusually good dancers. When she began to become lost in the dance, her dress whipped up high above her tan legs and her hair streamed down into her face. Periodically she would disappear when the lights died, then, when I spotted her again, she would be elsewhere.

Once, when the lights cut out, and the music turned gruesomely loud, I thought I heard a scream. And maybe I had. But then there were many screams, a chorus of them, a rush of ad-

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renalin that found its way into a spontaneous cry of enthusiasm. Everyone was riding the crest of the music now: "If you knew me like I know you, you wouldn't be saying the things you do."

Two strobe lights flashed down on the dancers. One, by chance, caught on Lise. She was spinning about wildly, her body in frantic motion, but her eyes were gaping and her face was twisted grotesquely. Only then did I notice that her orange dress was becoming spotted with red. I could not understand how this was happening, whether this was some unusual effect of the lights, until I realized that she was bleeding and that this bleeding was going on in several places, high on her shoulders, about her breasts, on her abdomen, on her thighs. The momentum of the dance kept her going, but she was starting to falter as if it had taken all this time for the wounds to register on her bewildered consciousness. If she made any sound, it was covered over by the music. "Tonight it's over, baby, tonight we're through, but please, please, please, don't ever forget the way I loved you."

Around her people continued to dance, oblivious of what had happened. But little by little, as they began to be spattered by her blood, they became aware of her. Some screamed, others, stricken with terror, backed away and stared at her incredulously. In the bath of the strobe the floor shone bright red with her blood, which described a series of circles and ellipses about her.

Sean came into view at last. He squeezed his way through in her direction, shouting her name. She didn't seem to hear. Her steps slowed and yet for all the pain she must have been experiencing, she did not seem to be able to stop dancing. I tried making my way towards her from the other end of the crowd. Farther back in the corners everyone was acting normally, picking up speed as they responded to the new rhythm emanating from the speakers.

Before Sean could reach her, she teetered for one precarious moment and collapsed. For several seconds more she thrashed on the floor, kicking her blood-smeared legs almost as if in defiance of her impending death. Of the orange in her dress there was practically nothing more to be seen, it was so full of her blood. As Sean stooped down, one final spasm ran through her, her head jerked back, and she lay still. Sean took hold of her, cradling her head in his hands. He seemed to be speaking to her, and for an instant, I thought she was about to reply; I could even see her lips

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open. But all that came out was more blood.

SKY WRITING

I came awake so abruptly it was as though someone had seized hold of me and jerked me out of bed. In the first moments of consciousness I knew that something was wrong, terribly wrong, but it wouldn't quite come to me what it was. Across the yard the Cummingses' house was silent.

Then I remembered.

It was still early; a thick haze clung to the sky, and it would be another couple of hours before it burned off.

By the time the sky was clear again, I was out on the beach, walking, just walking. At noon I was due at the police station at Lunar Beach to speak to the detectives and, presumably, to give them a statement. In point of fact, while I was supposed to be a witness, I didn't know what I had witnessed; I'd seen a murder, but not, to my knowledge, the murderer.

Ironically, while Lise had been slashed repeatedly by what was most likely a razor blade, only one of the wounds had been fatal. The carotid artery had been sliced through either by chance or because the murderer knew exactly what he was up to.

But it was hard to imagine Lise surviving with all those scars; she would no longer have been the same. I don't mean to say that I wanted her dead; it was just that she would no longer be the same, that's all.

The beaches were becoming crowded; the hordes coming out to the island to celebrate the weekend of the Fourth were just now arriving on the ferries, bearing loads of blankets, radios, and picnic baskets in disregard of local ordinances. There were multitudes of alluring women on view—more and more wherever I turned—but I was interested in none of them.

Over and above the ocean small planes, mostly Cessnas, came flying by, maintaining a very low altitude, with big red and black signs trailing behind them. "Self Magazine: We're Flying," one proclaimed. "Feel Better: N.Y. Health and Racket Club," another urged.

Then another plane appeared, cruising at a level much higher up than these other craft. As I stood there, watching, it gradually began to spell out a message, big and white in the now-clear blue sky. From the first two words I had a sense as to what was coming.

After a couple of minutes, the entire message was emblazoned against the heavens: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SEAN. LOVE FOREVER, LISE.

I continued to stare up at the sky until, one by one, the letters

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began to fade and then dissolve until there was nothing left of them at all.

For nearly three weeks I saw nothing of Sean. His daughter, I was given to understand, was sent to live with his parents in Philadelphia. Sean stayed on the island, not necessarily because he wished to but because the police had advised him that he was vital to the investigation into his wife's death. He did not, however, immediately return to his house, and so until late in July, it remained boarded up.

All I had to rely on for information relating to Lise's death were infrequent reports in the Meridian *Weekly News* and the gossip I picked up in my travels on the island. It was possible there were additional details in the papers published on the mainland, but I never saw them.

What I did know for a fact was that the police had immediately taken Joe Cassidy into custody. He was described as "an itinerant," which, translated from traditional island parlance, meant, I suppose, that he'd spent the previous month camping out in the national park way to the easterly end of the island. I wondered if he tried to describe his odyssey around the world to the police, but I doubted it; I could only picture him staring at his questioners with brooding eyes, cocooned in silence from which he would refuse to emerge, even for the purpose of defending himself.

He was said to have no source of income, which I had already surmised. Of course, on Meridian Island, to have no source of income in itself invited suspicion, if not always an indictment.

He was placed in a holding cell in the Lunar Beach police station, which was really no more than a converted cottage. I later heard that Sean told the police he was sure Joe was innocent. How much weight his statement might have carried is anyone's guess.

But there was no evidence to continue to hold him, and after forty-eight hours, he was allowed to leave. He was warned that he would have to get the next ferry off the island, however; otherwise he'd be thrown back into jail on various misdemeanor charges, among them sleeping and building a campfire on the beach.

Towards the end of July somebody told me that Sean himself was under suspicion. Though I was inclined to dismiss this as another groundless rumor, I began to think that maybe there was something to it. I did not like the idea, but it wouldn't go away, either.

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One evening, as dusk was washing the sky with a profligate display of lavenders, lemons, and reds, I happened to gaze across the yard in time to see a woman walking up the path towards the deck behind Sean's house. It was Kathy Barnes.

She was prettier than I recalled. I had been hoping that I'd run into her, but I never did. I'd never learned where she lived, and for all my treks up and down the beach, I'd not seen her. It was possible she'd left the island for a while after Lise was killed.

She wore a yellow T-shirt and blue shorts and sandals. Her hair was pinned up; she wore glasses, too, which I'd never seen on her before. When she got on the deck she did nothing, she just stood there. A few moments later the back door opened and Sean materialized. Until that moment I hadn't realized the house was occupied.

He faced her, unmoving, for I don't know how long, then ran into her arms. They embraced closely. There was so much silence it was remarkable. The only time the silence broke was when a mosquito misjudged its course and ended up electrocuted by that curious device in the bushes.

When the two disengaged, they went into the house. As far as I could tell not a word had passed between them. It was several hours later when they came out; then they proceeded to walk, arm in arm, back down the path and disappeared.

What if he had killed Lise? I wondered. Perhaps he had come to a point where he'd decided that words were no longer sufficient, that he could spout his theories about extremes all he wanted to, but that they'd be meaningless without putting them to the test. It was difficult, impossible really, to picture Sean as a murderer, to think of him as someone who would deprive Hillary of her mother. But how well did I know him? He was one of those people that, almost from the first, you feel you've known all your life; but that was illusion, that was not the way it was.

It was some time later that I discovered what occurred after they left the deck. I have only Kathy's word for it, but I don't doubt what she told me; it was too bizarre a story to make up. Actually, it was so implausible that I was sure it had to be absolutely true.

If the beach was a scene of flesh and congestion during the day, at night it was a place for lovers and the solitary walker who came seeking the consolation from nature he could find nowhere else. The tide had gone way out, leaving a flat stretch of mud, clumps of kelp, and the

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occasional pale oval form of a dead jellyfish in its wake. The sky was a theatre for the planets and the galaxies that extended beyond. Shooting stars looked as if they were bound for the Atlantic in their downward trajectory.

Sean and Kathy had not seen each other since the night of the killing—they'd spoken over the phone, that was all—and now, with so much on their minds that they wanted to say, they could not bring themselves to speak. They walked in silence for hours, they held hands, but dared not look into each other's eyes for fear of what they'd find there. But in that contact, the clasp of their hands, they tried to communicate their understanding, and perhaps, too, their love.

They came to a place on the edge of the beach that in high tide would have been under water. Several feet away the soapy froth of the tide surged back and forth.

It was after two in the morning; from one horizon to the other, as far as their eyes allowed them to see, there was no one else in sight. They stood barefoot in the caked surface of the mud as though they were waiting, without for one instant being sure what it was they were waiting for.

After a while their attention was caught by a sudden light to the east of them. Gradually it revealed itself to be the headlights of an approaching vehicle.

They watched it come closer. It was a van, painted a dusty green, the kind used for delivering lumber and plumbing to houses on the island. It didn't take long before it had come abreast of them, catching them in the harsh beams of its light.

It was not illegal to be taking a stroll along the beach late at night. But as the van headed towards them that was the feeling they got; they expected at any moment the driver would call out to them and order them to go home. But that did not happen, the driver didn't do any such thing. Instead he kept right on coming, altering his course so it looked as though he might run them over.

Because they could not believe that was what he had in mind, they did not, for several seconds anyhow, react. They remained where they were, watching the van's progress. But at a certain point there could no longer be any doubt; the van was aiming right for them. Sean, taking Kathy by the hand, started to run, eluding the van just before it would have collided with them.

There was no telling whether there was one man or two in the van. It was a detail of no great consequence. At any rate, the

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van backed up, drawing up on the beach, but only as a prelude to a second attack. This time Sean and Kathy ran straight into the water. The van swerved at the last instant before its tires sank too far into the mud.

As the incoming tide washed up against their thighs, the van went on down the beach and continued west, vanishing into the darkness.

THE MAN IN DERAIN

A week had to pass before I learned of this incident. I was in Morganthal's at the time. Morganthal's, in Sea Gate, was dark and cool and frequented mostly by fulltime islanders who, while recognizing the commercial benefits of hosting the summer people, did not feel that necessarily meant they had to like them. Morganthal's boasted a pool table, a dartboard, a pinball machine that jangled like crazy every time you scored a hundred thousand points on it, and a pair of video machines which emitted a succession of noisy bleeps on almost any pretext. I happened to be seated at the bar when I spotted Kathy on her way towards Harbor Light. I ran out to catch her and brought her back with me.

She had skin which turned lustrous and betel nut brown with the sun, and now she was darker than ever. Her teeth flashed brilliantly whenever she smiled. Sean was fortunate to have her, I thought.

It turned out that Kathy had not gone underground after Lise's death; our paths had just never crossed, that's all. She said she'd attended the funeral on the mainland, as most of Sean's friends had. Even those who knew of their affair, she insisted, did not think her presence inappropriate. "But do you know what was so odd?" she said. "The only relations who showed up were Sean's. There wasn't a single member of Lise's family there."

That *was* odd. I asked how this could possibly be. "Didn't somebody notify her family? They must have."

"That's just it. There was no family to alert. Early on, Sean said, when he first met her, she told him she had no family. Something about her parents dying when she was young—her mother of cancer at thirty, her father soon afterwards, a suicide, I heard. The relatives who brought her up, she said she couldn't stand. When she came of age she broke off all contact with them."

"And all her friends from her childhood? Everybody?"

"She had a past," Kathy said, "and she didn't like it much, I guess, so she got rid of it."

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"And what about Sean? How's he doing these days?"

"He was in seclusion for a while. Nobody saw or heard from him. Even me."

"And now?"

"And now he's trying to deal with something very weird."

I asked her what she meant. I was uncomfortably aware of how close she was to me: the fresh salty scent coming off her, the grazing contact of her breasts when she leaned towards me.

"After she died, he collected himself enough to begin going through her things. He discovered several letters he knew nothing about. Love letters, some of them written just in the past months. They were from a man named Marvin Driss. There was no telling how she responded, or whether she did. But what Sean can't understand was, if it was innocent, why didn't she tell him about it?"

"Who is this man, do you know?"

"Sean did some investigating. It wasn't hard to find out who he is. He's evidently a notorious figure on the island. Sean says that he has a home in Derain."

That alone was evidence of great wealth. Derain was to be found midway between Canticle and Aerie; while you could gain access to it from the beach you might be later told—very politely, of course—that unless you could state your reasons for being in Derain, you were better advised to leave. High metal gates flanked the township on either side, and keys were necessary to get in or out.

"Unlike most of the people who live in Derain—people who prefer their privacy—this Driss character seems to have made quite a reputation for himself. A real dissolute. When he wanted a girl he'd come here, to Sea Gate, and pick up a girl—or more than one if that was his inclination. When he wanted a boy, he'd turn up in Aerie or The Eves. You know those woods that separate Aerie from The Eves?"

I said I did.

"Well, those woods are where the men make it with each other. You can see them coming out of the trees, holding hands, if you walk through there."

"What's this got to do with Driss?"

"From what Sean says, he'd take some of the boys he found to the woods. Apparently he didn't like the idea of bringing them home to Derain with him unless he was really partial to them. It's weird, a man like that living in a community they featured in *Town and Country.*"

"Where did he get all his money from?"

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"Sean hasn't found that out, but he thinks he has so much of it that he's bought off the police. Not all of them, mind you, but enough."

"Bought off the police?" This sounded preposterous on the face of it. "So they won't bust him for making it with boys in the woods between Aerie and The Eves?"

She shook her head. "So they won't find out where his money is coming from. Sean thinks it must be illegal, drug money or Mafia. That's why he thinks Driss's friends are trying to scare him off the island, pulling stunts like they did Monday night."

It was then that she told me about what happened on the beach.

"But if, as you say, Driss has bought so many cops, why are they insisting he stay here?"

"Sean says that's what the official line is, but in fact, they'd like to see him leave for good. It's Sean's opinion that by his running around asking so many questions about Driss, he's bringing trouble down on his head."

"But he means to continue?"

"Of course. Lise was his wife, he has to find out who she was. Because it's his past, too. For all he knows, it might not have been real, any of it. And that's a frightening thing to have to deal with."

Indeed it was.

THE BAY AT NIGHT

I was in Morganthal's the following night, squandering several dollars' worth of quarters on videogames and pinball, which was, for me, a therapeutic way of killing time, particularly when my work wasn't going smoothly. When I emerged, I discovered it was much later than I'd supposed.

There was no one else on the walkway between Sea Gate and Harbor View, so there was no one to witness what I saw when I looked out onto the bay. At first I noticed nothing more startling than the reflection of the full moon on the water. Then, little by little, I made out the sound of a boat, loud and rapidly approaching. It could not be a ferry; ferries did not run past ten o'clock. Suddenly it materialized from the darkness, a flag flying from its prow. It was unmistakably a Coast Guard cutter speeding in the direction of Canticle and Derain. Two men in uniform were standing on the bridge; one held a pair of binoculars in his hands, scanning the bay, while the other manned a machine gun. The craft proceeded past the point where Harbor Light came to an end, and was quickly lost to sight, leaving behind the crest of its wake to ripple out

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across the bay.

Almost immediately, a police helicopter appeared over Island Park, to the west of Sea Gate, and, following the cutter, made its way towards Canticle, Derain, and Aerie beyond. A shaft of light shot out from the helicopter so that the waters closest to shore turned brilliant gold. But there was nothing to see; there was, very simply, nothing there.

TEA TIME

There was something to see the next morning if you managed to awaken early enough. I didn't, but I heard from some people who were on the same walk I'd taken the night before about the astonishing spectacle that greeted them on their way to and from Sea Gate.

Two, maybe three, bales of marijuana had washed up on the shoreline sometime during the night. Whatever it had all been wrapped in had come undone so that by the time the grass arrived on land it was a soggy mess, clumped together in knots of green and acorn-brown, stems, leaves, and seeds all sticking together. The marijuana had separated in its journey so that there were at least a dozen points from Island Park in the west to Canticle in the east where portions of it could be found. The police succeeded in getting their hands on the bulk of it before the locals could gather it up and set it out to dry on the privacy of their own decks.

I assumed that the marijuana had been thrown over the side of the boat the Coast Guard cutter and police helicopter had been pursuing. I hadn't seen the smuggler boat, but I had all the evidence I needed to adduce its existence.

Although I had been putting it off for a week, I felt obliged to pay a call on Sean. I was, in a way that I did not fully understand, connected to him and what had happened to him, and while he might have forgotten me, I could not escape the notion that I had a responsibility to him.

It was an awkward moment, standing at his front door, waiting to see if he could come and answer the bell. He could not be at the beach; after Lise's death he never went down to the beach any longer. I became aware of a particularly raucous crow in the branches of a nearby tree as I stood there on the porch. I imagined that I saw Sean peering down at me through the curtains in one of the upstairs windows.

Then the door opened. He was thinner, pared down, now that I could see him this close up. I hadn't realized how thin

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he'd become when I glimpsed him and Kathy on the deck Monday night. His face in particular held the history of these terrible weeks; his eyes had sunken, and the contour of his skull seemed to be asserting itself against his flesh which had, in the constant gloom of his house, begun turning sallow.

"Come in," he said.

I heard as I entered something different, something surprising, which I had all but forgotten.

It was the clock ticking. He noticed the direction of my gaze.

"Since she died it's been going like that," he said. "It's almost enough to make you think it means something. It couldn't possibly, but I have that feeling sometimes."

To my surprise, Sean proved quite receptive to being visited. It was all I could do to get him to talk about himself. Mostly he wanted to know how I'd been. I don't like to admit it, but I liked him better this way; his vulnerability, his sadness, made him more appealing, more human, I suppose.

"As soon as I can figure out what Lise was doing, what her involvement with Driss really was," he said at last, "then I plan to leave the island and never come back again. I hate it here. But I can't leave without knowing. One day I am going to have to tell Hillary something, and I want it to be the truth."

The following afternoon, he told me, he had an appointment with a man in The Eves who knew Driss. "A friend of Kathy's is introducing us. Maybe you know him, his name is Art Lerner." When I said that I didn't, Sean explained he'd been in the merchant marine before retiring year-round to the island. He owned bars in Sea Gate and The Eves and had, over the passage of many summers, made many friends and heard many stories. "You should come, too."

I wondered why Sean would want me along, but I was hardly about to refuse. I told him I would meet him at the water taxi dock in Sea Gate at four o'clock the next day. If we left then, we would certainly get to The Eves for tea time.

Tea time was a tradition in places like Aerie and The Eves which had nothing to do with tea. It was the time when the sun was low enough in the west to discourage sunbathers from lingering on the beach, leading them to abandon their stations and migrate to the bars and discos, there to drink and dance until the prospect of a shower and dinner could lure them home again.

The first indication that you were close to The Eves was the sight of flags flapping in the

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seaborne breeze above the houses that overlooked the dunes. The flags were the national colors of France and Italy, hung out by citizens of those two countries who lived in the houses. Narrow gray boardwalks led from the beach side to the bay side where the commercial center of the township was situated: it was designed with quaintness and charm in mind, a string of shops with white walls and picture windows, yielding out onto a pier where you had only to fall out of one open-air bar to land in another. Throughout the day men and women in brightly colored beachwear or next to nothing at all would parade back and forth along the length of the pier, either on their way to one of the boats at anchor or away from one. The boats, in the mid-August sun, made for a spectacular show of gleaming white sails and hulls, white and blue and tangerine and lime in color. Unquestionably, The Eves was a wealthier community than her neighbor a stretch of woods away. People here could be counted on to have either money or a great deal of money; those were the basic two choices. Sometimes you would come on somebody with an astounding amount of money just as you would, occasionally, encounter someone who affected to have more money than he in fact did. But there was never a chance you would meet a person without any.

Art Lerner was a man in his fifties, with a face that had turned all red with the sun and that showed no sign of ever turning to the kind of prosperous tan that the people at surrounding tables evidenced. He was sitting on the deck of a bar-disco that looked out over the harbor. A ferry was making its way towards the dock, but the comings and goings of the ferry held none of the drama that attached itself to the sailboats and powerboats that routinely pulled in to The Eves to disgorge their cargo of millionaires.

He greeted the three of us, but without getting up. He seemed to be one of those people who has resigned himself to a life of perpetual defeat. He was drinking the specialty of the house; called a Blue Whale, after its deep blue color, it incorporated Blue Curacao, gin, and lemon juice. Only Kathy dared try it.

"I don't know where he is," Art said, referring to the man he was set to introduce us to. "I told him four thirty. It's now quarter to five. Might be he's still on the beach. Well, you're in no hurry, are you?"

Whether this unnamed contact would show or not, we at least had not wasted our time

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coming all the way here. Art Lerner had something of interest he wished to point out to us.

"See that big boat over there, next to the *Hatteras?*"

We said that we did; it was at least thirty feet in length, a powerboat with a projecting deck over the stern and a cabin in which all the windows were hidden by sand-colored curtains.

"And you see that man on the pier standing right next to it?"

The man he'd pointed to was leaning indolently against the wood post to which the power boat was tied. He wore a checkered shirt and the kind of sunglasses that gave you back your own reflection and nothing else.

"FBI," said Lerner matter-of-factly.

"FBI?" Sean was no less surprised than the rest of us.

"The boat's been impounded. But by the feds, not the county police. The county police and all the local boys have been taken off the case. It's hard to believe. I've known most of the island police for years. I've had more than my share of drinks with them. But I suppose there are always a few on any force who can be bought. It seems that the owner of the boat had some of them in his pocket."

"Are you sure of this?" Sean asked, obviously excited to have his own theory confirmed by someone else.

"Oh, I'm sure all right. He raised his eyes and regarded us with a look of wry amusement. "You know who that boat over there belongs to?"

It bore the name *The Red Unicorn* on its hull, but no, we had no idea who owned it.

"Marvin Driss. You heard about those bales of weed that came ashore this morning? That's where they came from. Coast Guard chased it over past Five Points. By the time they got on board there was no one there. But there's a warrant out for Driss's arrest. It's a federal warrant. By Labor Day, I swear to you, this whole thing's going to bust wide open."

"I'd really like to meet this Driss," said Sean.

I had a feeling he was already beginning to tie Driss into the murder of his wife, that by solving the mystery of one he thought he'd be able to solve the mystery of the other.

Under the table Kathy took hold of his hand and held it hard.

"I'm not sure you're going to be able to do that, meet Driss. I hear they checked out his house in Derain this morning. He wasn't there. No surprise. You wouldn't be home either if something like this happened to you. I doubt he's still on the island."

Glancing at his watch, he wondered anew about what had

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become of the man he wanted Sean to talk to. "Sure, he never shows up on time, but this is ridiculous."

"Who is this fellow?" Kathy asked.

"Guy named Ibraham Roualt, he's half-French, half-Lebanese, as flagrant a homosexual as they come. Claimed he was one of Driss's lovers for awhile. I don't know how much he knew about Driss's business affairs, but I thought, since you were so interested, you might like to talk to him. He seemed perfectly willing to tell you whatever he could. He promised me he'd be here. You wait, I'm going to go call."

In ten minutes he was back. "Damndest thing," he muttered. "The guy who answered says that Roualt left on the ferry early this morning, caught the first ferry out, in fact. So I made another call, to somebody else I know here, a bartender who works at Uncle Peter's. He'd also had some dealings with Driss. Whoever answered at the bar said that he's left the island, too. Same ferry."

LABOR DAY WEEKEND

"Wagon? Do you want a wagon?" the little boys would cry out each time a ferry arrived, bringing with it yet another contingent of weekenders determined to complete their tans and wrest a last bit of pleasure from the dying season. Unwittingly parodying the urchins of far-off harbors who latch onto disembarking tourists, these children of the rich and the very rich demanded fifty cents to transport luggage from the dock to your house.

I'd been in the city for a week, for meetings with the writer whom I was doing all this research for, and now I was back. Two weeks remained until I would depart for good, just as many others would be doing on Labor Day. In those two weeks I had a great deal of work to catch up on; the writer seemed to have decided to move in a slightly different direction in his book, necessitating a whole new array of facts to be assembled.

I hired one of the kids to help me carry several of the books I'd brought back with me. Just before I reached my house, I ran into Kathy emerging from the grocery store. She brightened to see me. When she learned that I'd been away she said, "Oh, so you don't know then."

"I don't know what?"

"Sean has left."

She fell into step next to me. The wagon was making a great deal of noise along the path behind us. The little boy appeared

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wholly oblivious to it.

"Left? How do you mean left?"

"He's gone away from the island for good. Shut down his house, packed his bags, and took the noon ferry Wednesday."

I expected her to sound more bereft, but maybe she hid her sadness well or else had long ago gotten used to the idea that he'd be leaving someday.

At my house I paid off the little boy and we resumed our conversation. "Tell me what happened."

"Why don't you come walk with me? I'd prefer to walk."

So we walked, and as we did, she told me that whatever she and Sean had shared was over weeks before he departed. "What was happening was that he was falling in love with Lise all over again." She knew I wouldn't quite fathom that, and she attempted to explain. "He was becoming obsessed with her. He realized she wasn't who he thought she was. It was like meeting a stranger for the first time. He dreamed about her. He told me he'd be sitting alone at night on the beach and feel her come up to him and place her hands on his shoulders and whisper something to him — something he could almost make out, but not quite. Then he'd turn around and there'd be nobody there, of course. But he was convinced that she was never very far from him. He felt as though he could, if he pressed hard enough, break through to her." She fastened her large brown eyes on me, and in the paling Friday afternoon light, they seemed to burn.

"I realized finally that I was losing him, that I'd lost him," she said.

We continued on for a while in silence. I felt very sad for her and for myself, too, at that moment, though for reasons I could not readily put my finger on.

We had now come abreast of Derain. There was a large clubhouse with a deck full of pastel umbrellas under which couples idled and sipped Campari and sodas. Kathy was turning towards the dunes, beckoning me to follow her up the stairs and into Derain. I'd never been in Derain before, and I was hesitant about going inside now; outsiders were not exactly welcomed.

But nobody stopped us, though a few shot us curious glances that I construed as a sign of mild displeasure on their part. Within the limits of the township, pines and great elms shaded the quiet walkways; flowers bloomed in profusion on every side, water purled somewhere within the bushes where we couldn't see it. The houses were big and sprawling, their wood paneling burnished russet and sepia and mahogany;

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they were better conceived than houses I'd seen elsewhere on the island, and somehow more permanent looking, as if in defiance of any new storm that might come blowing up from the Caribbean.

A stretch of old, rotting, railroad ties ran from the westerly fence by Canticle almost the entire way to the fence on the east. What its purpose might have been was anyone's guess; Kathy didn't know.

Not far from these tracks we came on a house separated from its neighbors by a knot of pines on either side; it was a house built in the shape of a trapezoid, with slate-gray wood; the few windows in it were as oddly shaped as the structure itself. I already had a feeling I knew whose house this was. "Marvin Driss?"

A trace of a smile formed on her lips.

"They never found him while I was gone, did they?"

"No, and they never will, either."

"Then your friend Art was right, he did flee the island."

Shaking her head, she said, "No, not that either."

"What happened then, did somebody kill him?"

"They couldn't kill him. They couldn't because he never existed in the first place."

I thought she was joking. She was not joking. "But all those lovers of his, all the letters he wrote to Lise, his boat, this house, how can you stand there and tell me he doesn't exist?"

"He was a fabrication, contrived out of whole cloth. Just like what your writer does with his characters, only the people who invented Marvin Driss didn't do it on the page of some novel, they did it in real life. Art did some digging. He began comparing signatures on various receipts that Driss signed in stores and restaurants. He noticed that they weren't always the same. They would be close, but not the same. He eventually scrounged up a photograph of Driss. He didn't like being photographed, but somebody caught him with a group of people before he could move away. He showed the photograph to some other people who said they knew Driss, and they said that that wasn't him at all. But the person who'd taken the shot said there was no mistake, that it definitely was Driss. Little by little he compiled enough evidence to prove, at least to his satisfaction and to Sean's, that Driss was an invention.

"You see, the people who invented him managed to get hold of a couple of actors, pretty boys, you know the type? You find them everywhere in New York waiting on tables. They probably looked near enough alike for their purposes. They

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paid them a lot of money, much better than Equity scale, and told them what to do, when to party, whom to pick up. They would work mostly at night, in Aerie or in The Eves. Some guy picks you up, tells you his name's Marvin Driss, even takes you to a place like this—" She gestured to the silent house looming in front of us. "What are you going to say, that he's not Marvin Driss? Word gets out. It's dark, you have lots to drink, lots to smoke, you maybe have had too much coke or too many luudes. You don't remember exactly what somebody looked like. They even arranged for the bribes to those cops, but it was all done very discreetly. There were intermediaries. You have enough money in this world and intermediaries are no problem.

"But that wasn't enough. They made up all sorts of documents, legal instruments, memos, letters like the love letters to Lise, enough evidence, in short, that—over two or three years—would convince anyone without a shadow of a doubt of his existence."

"But why?"

"Drugs. Cocaine, marijuana, Sean thinks maybe heroin, too, though he's not sure about that. The reason Marvin Driss was created, almost made into a myth, was to deceive the police and then the feds, to distract them from looking for the people who were really involved."

We were walking again, though I hardly knew where to. Eventually we would come to the gate through which you could see Canticle, but we'd need somebody to let us out. We had no key, after all.

"How did Lise fit into this?"

"She was a part of it. She was one of the people running drugs up here. I don't know when she meant to let Sean find the letters, but she was probably going to do it when she and her friends were ready to cash it in and leave the island. If she hadn't been killed, I assume the operation they had going would still be functioning."

"Those friends of Art's that didn't show up that day in The Eves? That Ibraham fellow? That bartender he mentioned?"

"I couldn't say for sure, but I'd bet you they were a part of it. I talked to Art just before Sean left. He says he thinks what happened was that Lise's death threw everyone into a panic. They thought that one of them must have killed her, but no one could figure out who—or why, for that matter. So they decided to cut out. Art feels that they deliberately aborted that final dope run, choosing a night with a full moon so the boat was sure to be spotted by the Coast Guard."

"Then the life that Lise led

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was a fraud?"

"I don't know, I wouldn't want to go that far," Kathy replied. "It must have been an act to an extent. Probably everyone involved had their own role. Maybe this Ibraham Roualt wasn't gay at all, but was only playing at it. Maybe nobody in this was what they purported to be. It got very elaborate and byzantine, but then with so many millions of dollars at stake, maybe it had to be. But with Lise, I'm not so sure there wasn't something real about her. Maybe she did want to settle down and have a family. Who knows, though, who she really was, what her name was, what her background was. Before Sean, before this island, nobody knows anything for certain except what she told them. Four years ago the coke and grass were moving freely into Florida. It's Sean's guess she came from there, that when the Coast Guard began to beef up its patrols in the Gulf, she came up the coast with her friends.

"But I am sure of one thing," she said, her voice nearly breaking, "and that's that she loved Hillary. She loved her little girl. That wasn't any fraud. That was real, that was very real."

Tears were in her eyes, but she wiped them clear. Then, suddenly, she took my arm and pulled me closer to her as we continued back on our way towards Harbor Light.

There was still one important question that Kathy hadn't addressed, one that neither she nor Sean had determined the answer to. Who, finally, had killed Lise Cummings?

THE OCEAN SIDE OF NEPTUNE STREET

I was sunning myself, taking a breather from work around three o'clock one day, when I saw him. I don't know where he had come from, he was just, suddenly, there. It was close to the fifteenth of September, and while the weather was still very much summerlike, the island was already beginning to take on the half-empty look it had in winter; the beach was particularly unpopulated, and you often had to walk for very long stretches before coming on somebody else. So he was very conspicuous, sitting there, on a smooth dead piece of wood cast up from the sea one high tide.

His beard had become wilder, the auburn-colored locks of his hair shaggier, since I'd last laid eyes on him, but otherwise he didn't look so different from that night in the Rock Candy. It took me a while to recall his name; it had been such a very long time. Then it came back to me: Joe Cassidy.

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He wasn't supposed to be on the island; the police had made that abundantly clear to him when they'd released him. But he didn't appear to be somebody who took orders very easily. He'd probably returned to prove that no one could tell him what to do with his life. And in any event, I'd observed that a number of the police on the island had gradually been changed. Despite Art's prediction that a major scandal would break in the papers, all I'd seen mentioned were parties for retiring police officers. The replacements would have no idea who Joe Cassidy was, or why he wasn't supposed to be here on Meridian Island.

A backpack was slung over his shoulders, and one of those lightweight goosedown sleeping bags, crammed into a small gunny sack, dangled down at his side. It was obvious he'd been camping out, very likely in the national park farther to the east. As I watched him, he unfolded a paper bag and produced from it a lump of cheese. Then, from a sheath I hadn't noticed before, he drew a blade far longer and sharper than the task at hand required.

He cut himself a slice and greedily wolfed it down. He repeated this process until there was nothing left of the cheese but the black skin of its rind. Then, very delicately, he put the tip of the knife to his teeth and began to pick out the bits of cheese caught between them.

It was only at that moment that he seemed to notice me. He shifted his gaze and gave me a long, questioning stare. I doubted he could place me, but I sensed that he felt he knew me from somewhere even so. His eyes were intensely dark, almost feverish. Sean had been right; he was truly an outsider, a stranger to all society, a loner who belonged nowhere in this world.

I knew then, beyond any doubt, that he had been the one to kill Lise. But how he'd been able to dispose of his knife and convince the police of his innocence were things that I would never have any way of finding out.

I suffered from the chilling thought that Sean had hired him to murder his wife and helped him to escape. Was it possible that he had discovered what Lise had been up to prior to her death and had then resolved to avenge himself? Maybe he'd only pretended to carry on an investigation of her life, maybe he'd already known. It wasn't inconceivable that Lise had told him everything one day in an effort to unburden herself.

But I had long before concluded that Sean was innocent of her death—innocent, too, of

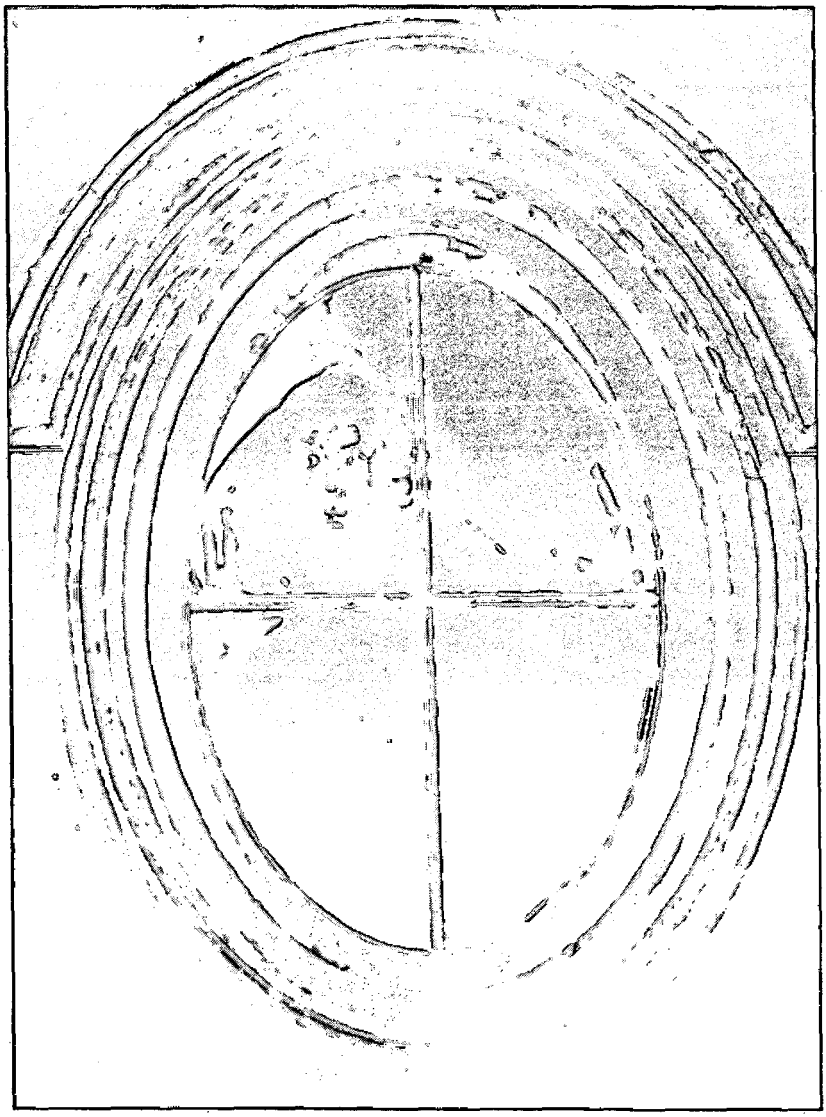
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her life. No, I decided, it must be this man, this loner, this cipher, who'd killed her. Sean, by inviting him to join him, to share his life, might have wanted to show him that there were in this world people who cared for loners and who welcomed them so that they needn't feel so far apart. And he had responded by taking Lise's life as if to prove that Sean was horribly, unredeemably, wrong.

He would never know what he had caused by his random act of violence; by killing Lise, he had torn down the curtains, overturned the props, demolished all the riggings and lights of a play which was supposed to have had another climax, another resolution entirely. He would never know, but if he did, I don't believe for a minute he would care.

Slowly he drew himself erect. He no longer seemed to have any interest in me. Adjusting the straps of his knapsack, he crumpled up the empty paper bag and tossed it on the beach. Then, with a leisurely gait, he began heading east, back the way he'd come from, to the point where the island stopped, and where there was nothing but three thousand miles of water to cross before you reached the next square inch of solid ground.

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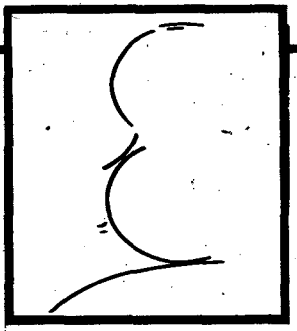
Anthony Perkins in *Psycho II*, in a replica of the house made famous by the original *Psycho*.

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MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



When Alfred Hitchcock's insane killer, Norman Bates, was put away in an asylum twenty-two years ago, it seemed clear that he would remain in custody for life. But things have changed since then, and the premise that a psychopathic murderer of seven people could be set free, possibly to kill again, is all too convincing and chilling. **Psycho II** thus starts off promisingly, with Norman Bates being released at a court hearing while Vera Miles, who played the sister of one of his victims in Hitchcock's *Psycho,* shouts that he should not be released to kill again.

But there's something else that has changed in the past twenty years. Once audiences discovered Norman Bates' insanity at the end of *Psycho,* many people returned again and again to watch the action armed with that knowledge from the beginning. Each time the movie was shown, its aficionados would break into knowing laughter as soon as Anthony Perkins appeared on the screen. *Psycho* became a cult movie.

Psycho II has been made with this development in mind. Right at the outset a slight glint comes into the supposedly cured Norman Bates's eye, and the audience howls. Anthony Perkins, who again plays Norman, tries to give a restrained performance, as he did the first time. But he is trapped in a movie about a movie, and his every gesture is made into a joke. Perkins is framed by replicas of the famous settings from *Psycho:* Bates Motel and Mrs. Bates's Victorian house overlooking it from the top of the long flight of outdoor stairs. And needless

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to say, the murders committed this time evoke one or another of the two killings in *Psycho*—of Janet Leigh and of the detective played by Martin Balsam.

Psycho was terrifying, but the terror took the form of anticipation inside the mind of the audience. No one who saw that movie can forget the stabbing of Janet Leigh in the motel room shower. Yet in that famous sequence the camera never showed an actual stab or wound. *Psycho II* is also terrifying. But its five grisly murders leave nothing to the imagination. The blood is filmed in close-up technicolor just as if this were a drive-in horror movie like the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

The plot of *Psycho II* is really very clever. For a long time it is difficult to tell whether Norman Bates has been cured or not, and it isn't until the final scenes that we learn who has been doing the killing. Unfortunately, though, the main business seems to be the display of gore. The more *Psycho II* repeats scenes and angles from Hitchcock, the more it reminds us of how much a departure it is from his kind of subtlety.

The James Bond formula has been applied successfully yet again in **Octopussy,** starring Roger Moore, the thirteenth movie in the series that began in 1962 with *Dr. No*. The opening chase sequence this time features a foldup, miniature jet plane. The exotic locales again harbor exquisitely beautiful women intent on seducing Bond, though this time their master—an international jewel smuggler known as "Octopussy"—is also a woman. Once again Bond must singlehandedly grapple with an evil henchman of superhuman strength. This fellow, who can crush a pair of dice to dust with his bare hands, slows Bond down considerably in his race against time to prevent a nuclear explosion calculated to shake the Western Alliance to its foundations.

Much of the action in *Octopussy* takes place in the fabulous city of Udaipur, India, a kind of Venice of the Orient. The female master criminal is ensconced in a remote fortress where she is protected by a small army of scantily clad, beauty queen-like bodyguards.

Bond proceeds in his usual manner. That is, he dresses himself impeccably and then walks directly into the heart of danger. Luckily he has with him just the right new devices—this time secreted in a pen and in his watch. Using these, he proves himself almost as adept at escape as he is at subjecting himself to drubbings, captures, and incarcerations.

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FRAMES OF REFERENCE

by Peter Christian



A master criminal strikes in the shadows. " 'The newspapers,' " we overhear someone explain, " 'named him "The Bat" because he moved with incredible rapidity—always at night—and he seemed to be able to see in the dark.' " So Mary Roberts Rinehart described her unknown killer creation in **The Bat,** the 1915 stage play she had based on her wildly successful novel of a decade before, *The Circular Staircase.* The play was the basis for a silent movie in the twenties which, in 1930, was redone as the first important "talking" mystery movie, *The Bat Whispers.*

Robustly directed by Roland West, the film, rich in shadowy atmosphere and innovative moving-camera (flitting "bat's-eye view") techniques, had long been thought of as lost, relegated to the limbo of unseen, legendary cinematic masterpieces. Until this year. The archivist Blackhawk Films company of Davenport, Iowa, has just painstakingly resurrected and will shortly release this landmark drama for historians and mystery enthusiasts.

Film scholar Raymond G. Cabana, Jr., has said of the film, "Since *The Bat* is the first of its kind, its importance to the detective genre is without question." *The Bat Whispers* starts with the promise of opulent melodrama. In a prologue that sweeps across the night city—an art deco jumble of skyscrapers—a rich industrialist whom the Bat has marked for death paces his barricaded highrise apartment, confident of his safety. Nothing can reach up at him from the streets far below. As he gloats by an open window, the camera pulls back to reveal the masked figure of the dangling archcriminal, his hands about to throttle his victim *from above.* We dis-

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solve to a nightmarish journey: the Bat's wild flight by car into the country, followed by a few quick expressionistic shots as he robs the vault of a suburban bank. Then we arrive at the setting of the story proper: the brooding, isolated Fleming estate. (Rinehart in her original story had actually established the prototype of the old-dark-house mystery thriller, even before *The Cat and the Canary* and long before Priestley's *The Old Dark House* itself.) There we meet another of the author's enduring creations—middle-aged mystery novelist Cornelia Van Gorder.

Cornelia is no retiring village Marple. She is a spunky, determined professional who has opened the ancient house for the summer as a place to write, accompanied only by a somewhat scatterbrained maid and her niece. When a special police officer, Detective Anderson (Chester Morris, later to play Boston Blackie in a long-running film series), arrives to warn her that the sinister, unknown Bat is somewhere in the vicinity ("He's contrived to surround himself with such an air of mystery that it verges on the supernatural"), and that stolen securities are rumored to be hidden in the house, it doesn't faze her in the least. But terror mounts. The Bat glides to claim another victim; flashes of lightning during a nighttime storm reveal him spreading his wing-like cloak atop a barren tree, or perched on a trellis, or looming through a window. Interestingly, as Scott MacQueen reveals in an *American Classic Screen* comment, Director West—for optimum atmospherics—shot the film *only at night* (an unheard-of extravagance), so that the horrors are never dispersed by sunshine.

Ultimately, the Bat is caught and unmasked—but even the relief of the solution is torn by genuine fright. Hopelessly insane, leering straight into the camera, the master fiend taunts: "There never was a jail built strong enough to hold the Bat, and after I've paid my respects to your cheap lock-up, I shall return . . . at night! *The Bat always flies at night, and always . . . in a straight line!*" The film fades out on his defiant laughter. After the closing credits, Chester Morris steps out as himself to ask audiences not to reveal the ending.

Both the Bat and Cornelia Van Gorder have frequently reappeared in newer versions of the story. Helen Hayes and Agnes Moorehead are among the actresses who have portrayed the mystery-solving novelist on screen, and Zasu Pitts toured for years as her frightened maid, Lizzie. But the rediscovery of the original talking film is wonderful news. After many decades, the fearsome Bat will once more be exposed to sunlight—and whisper again.

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UNSOLVED

by C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

Hank Miller, a small-time gambler and racketeer, was shot and fatally wounded in front of the pool hall in Smalltown by someone driving past in a big sedan. Hank had a number of enemies, but the police soon narrowed down their search for the killer to three men who were apprehended in Bigtown several days after the murder. At the time of their arrest the authorities were morally certain that one of these three was guilty, and subsequent developments proved this to be correct. Each of the men had a lengthy police record and was congenitally incapable of making three consecutive statements without lying. Nevertheless they were questioned, and their assertions are listed here for whatever they may be worth.

Lefty: Spike killed Hank.
I never was in Smalltown in my life.
I'm innocent.

Spike: Red is innocent.
Everything Lefty said is a lie.
I didn't do it.

Red: I didn't kill him.
Lefty lied when he said he'd never been in Smalltown.
Spike lied when he said that everything Lefty said was a lie.

Who killed Miller?

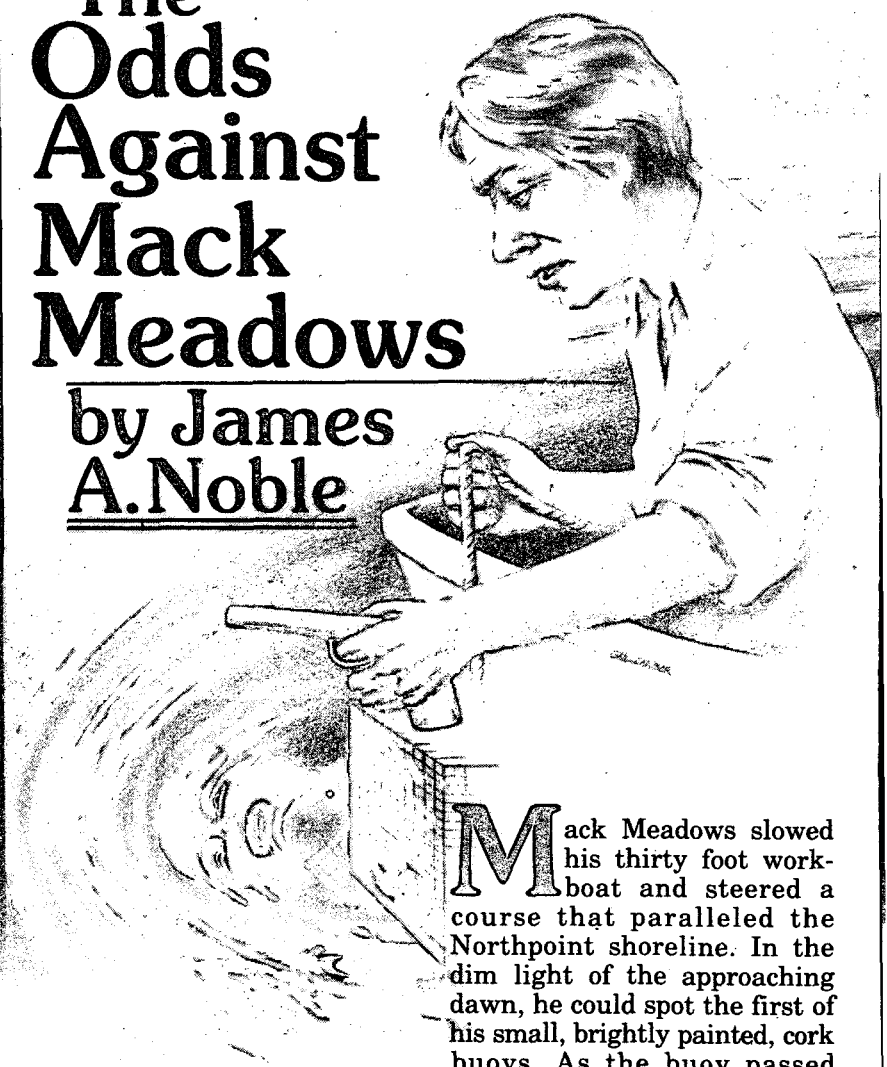
See page 154 for the solution to the September puzzle.

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The Odds Against Mack Meadows

by James A. Noble



Mack Meadows slowed his thirty foot workboat and steered a course that paralleled the Northpoint shoreline. In the dim light of the approaching dawn, he could spot the first of his small, brightly painted, cork buoys. As the buoy passed alongside the boat, he dipped his boat hook under it and snagged the rope leading down

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to the crab trap sitting on the muddy bottom of the bay.

In spite of the unusually poor harvest so far this season, his morning's anticipation had not left him. As soon as he started pulling on the rope, however, his excitement faded. The cube-shaped trap came up quickly, and far too easily to be well loaded. The first one usually told the story of how well the other traps would do; Mack could tell it was going to be another bad day.

When the trap broke the surface, he balanced it on the side of the boat, bent open the wire mesh that formed one upper edge of the trap, and dumped the few undersized crabs into a nearby basket. Then he shoved fresh bait fish into the small cylinder in the center of the trap, resecured it, and tossed it back overboard, allowing the rope to slip between his fingers as it sank so it would land upright on the bottom. His day as a Chesapeake Bay waterman had begun.

Mack had gone through bad seasons before, but that had never diminished his love for the bay. While others might prefer the nine to five ritual, a nagging boss, and punching a time clock, he luxuriated in the hard outdoor labor and independence his work as a waterman afforded. Unfortunately, with this freedom came risks. Seafood markets could drop; consistently bad weather or a poor harvest could reduce the number and quality of the crabs; a badly damaged or lost boat might spell financial ruin.

Those harsh realities were now staring Mack in the face. He was deeply in debt and behind on payments. The finance company would be repossessing his boat next week. Without a boat, you couldn't be a waterman. Only a miracle could keep him going . . . and it wasn't long in coming.

He had harvested twenty crab traps when he came to Number Twenty-one, just off the Northpoint Beach. When he pulled it to the surface, he saw a bright, chrome-plated revolver wedged in a mesh of wire on top of the trap. The safety lever had been broken off, and Mack knew it must be the gun used by the ski mask bandit.

Over a dozen armed robberies in the county had been linked to the ski mask bandit. All the holdup victims had said the thief was wearing a plain blue ski mask and wielding a chrome-plated revolver. The sheriff's department was able to get an exact make on the gun from the safety lever that had broken off in one of the early robberies: the thief had used the pistol to break a lock on a small cash box. They had several slugs as well, for the robber had a habit

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of firing warning shots over his victims' heads. Fred Carver, owner of the local hardware store, had been the latest holdup victim just a few weeks ago.

Mack found an oily rag in the front of the boat, wiped the gun off, and wrapped it up. He continued his work on the crab traps, humming softly to himself. In his mind, a plan was forming.

When he finished work, he took what few baskets of crabs he had caught to the buyers' pier and then headed for his own boatslip near Swain's waterfront bar. He secured his boat and walked to the parking lot where his pickup truck waited. He drove straight to Carver's Hardware Store, picked out a can of spray paint at random, and went to the counter where Fred was working. As soon as Mack brought up the subject of the robbery, Fred talked like a magpie. By the time Mack left the store, he knew all about the ski mask bandit's appearance and mannerisms. Fred even showed him the bullet holes in the wall. Outside, Mack tossed the spray paint into a trashcan.

That afternoon, Mack carefully cleaned the gun and the three bullets he had found in its cylinder. He located some old clothes similar to the thief's and a blue ski mask he sometimes used on the bay when the weather was cold and windy. He put on the clothes and stuck the ski mask in his pocket. Next, he drove out to a secluded area in the woods and test-fired the gun and one of the bullets. It worked perfectly.

It took him nearly an hour to get to the other side of the county where Harwood's Liquor Store was located. Harwood's was ideal; it did a brisk business during the week and would probably have a lot of money on hand. Mack was not well known in the area.

He parked in a side alley that afforded a clear view of the store and watched. When most of the customers had gone, he pulled on the ski mask, went inside, and drew the revolver. "Nobody move," he yelled in the exaggerated, deep voice Fred Carver had described. "Give me all the money . . . now!"

The cashier was not in any mood to be brave, and Mack soon had his pockets stuffed with tens and twenties.

"Everybody stay put or you'll get hurt," warned Mack. He fired two shots over the cashier's head and fled through the front door. Minutes later, he was on the open highway, headed for home.

He took the money from his pockets and laid it on the seat next to the ski mask and gun. Making a rough count as he sped down the road, Mack was

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pleased when he was able to estimate over seven hundred dollars. He'd be able to keep his boat after all . . . and the good life.

That evening, Mack burned the ski mask and his coat in a trash barrel behind his house. He wrapped the gun in a rag and stuck it under the seat of the truck.

The next morning, he took the gun along when he went out to work his traps. At the place off Northpoint Beach where he had originally found the gun, he spotted another workboat. He would have to wait until the next day to drop the gun overboard. If the real ski mask bandit got caught, he wanted the police to find the gun in the same general area where the thief might confess having tossed it.

The following morning, the bay and the beach were deserted, so he threw the gun over the stern and continued harvesting his traps.

When Mack returned to his boatslip that afternoon, he felt like celebrating and decided to have a beer at Swain's. Confident that his crime had gone undetected, he was undisturbed by the presence of Sheriff Jim Wicker, sitting at the bar.

"Sheriff, if that's a beer you're drinking, you'd better be off duty," Mack joked as he approached.

The sheriff wasn't in a good mood. "Easy on me, Mack. I'm having a bad couple of days."

"What's wrong?"

"We got the ski mask bandit last night."

Mack wondered if the robber would try to deny the liquor store job and whether anyone would believe him. "I'd think that would make you happy."

"It was Charlie Bridger, Mack," sighed Wicker. "He shot it out with us with a rifle. I had to kill him."

Mack was both shocked and relieved. Shocked that a quiet man and one as well liked as Bridger could be the ski mask bandit, yet relieved that the only man who could deny robbing the liquor store was dead. "I'm sorry to hear that, sheriff. Who would think that Charlie . . . " He left the comment unfinished.

"He pulled another job over at Harwood's Liquor on the other side of the county just the day before yesterday." said Wicker. "We still haven't found the money from that robbery or that darn chrome-plated revolver of his. If we could just find that gun, we could get ballistics to match up the slugs from each of the robbery scenes and tie the case up."

"Did you say chrome-plated revolver?" asked Mack. "You know, I saw Charlie Bridger out on the Northpoint Beach

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just yesterday morning. He was throwing something shiny in the water. I think it could have been a gun."

"Tell me exactly where."

"Well, I'd just come around the point in my boat to work my traps along the beach and I saw him throw this object out . . . oh, maybe thirty yards. It landed just about in line with my cork buoys."

"That could be the break we need to close this case," said Wicker. "Thanks, Mack."

On the bar phone the sheriff requested that a scuba diver meet him at Northpoint Beach. Shortly thereafter, Wicker left.

Three hours later, Mack was still sitting at the bar sipping a draught when the sheriff returned.

"You find it?" asked Mack.

Sheriff Wicker sighed deeply. "Are you sure you saw Charlie Bridger throw a gun into the water yesterday morning?"

"Yeah . . . sure. Couldn't you find it?"

"We found it." Wicker paused. "Why are you lying to me?"

"What do you mean?" said Mack, uneasily.

"The diver found the gun sitting on top of one of your crab traps."

Mack couldn't believe it. That gun must have an affinity for his traps. "So what?" he said. "It probably floated down on top of my trap when Charlie threw it in the water."

"The fellows at the buyers' pier say you worked your traps yesterday and today. If you'd pulled that trap up after the gun landed on top of it, it would have fallen off, or at least you would have seen it."

Mack felt a cold tension in the back of his neck. "I must have missed that trap."

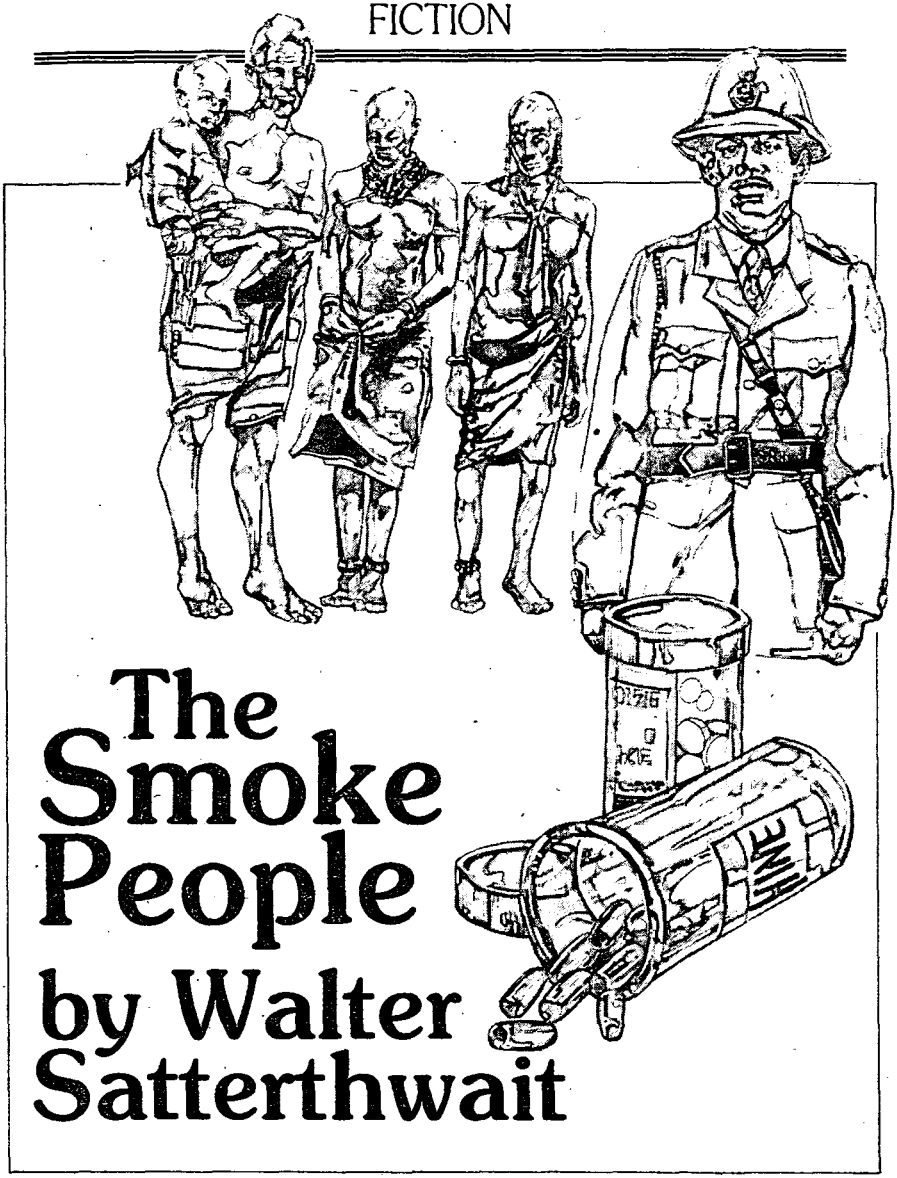
"You mean to tell me you missed the same trap both yesterday and today?"

"It . . . it could have happened that way. Who's to say it didn't?"

"There weren't any crabs in the trap and the bait was fresh," continued Sheriff Wicker. "Since you said Charlie threw the gun in the water yesterday morning before you worked the traps along the beach, how do you figure someone took the crabs out and put fresh bait in without disturbing the gun on top . . . and all underwater?"

Mack looked down at the coins the bartender had superglued to the countertop as a joke on the fellows who were always picking up someone else's change. He was thinking about his boat. He knew he wouldn't be needing it, after all . . . at least not for the next several years.

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The Smoke People

by Walter Satterthwait

Illustration by Arthur George

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Palm trees *whicked* past the open windows. Ahead, and rapidly approaching, were the beach road and the sea wall; beyond lay a tawny stretch of sand and the blue, glittering expanse of Indian Ocean, a few faraway dhows with shark-fin sails loafing across it. Constable Kobari began to slow the Toyota Land Cruiser—as though trying to persuade the stop sign at the corner that he might break precedent and actually obey the traffic laws.

Abruptly, he released the clutch, floored the gas pedal, and wrenched at the steering wheel. Tires wailing, lurching on its stiff suspension, the Toyota spun to the right and sprinted south, skidding and skittering. Kobari cackled once, delighted, worked up through the gears with wicked relish, then turned and grinned at Sergeant Andrew Mbutu.

Andrew, who had many times witnessed Kobari's impersonation of Steve McQueen, was not impressed. "One day," he said in Swahili, "you'll kill us both."

"It's the reflexes, sergeant," explained Kobari seriously. "The reflexes and the timing. If both are good, you need never worry."

"And what of the tires?" asked Andrew. "Suppose one had burst just then."

Kobari considered this for a moment. At last he said, "In that case, the car would've gone over the sea wall." He grinned. "And we would both be dead."

Andrew nodded. "Splendid."

"But the tires didn't burst," said Kobari easily, and returned to lancing his Maserati down the straight at Monte Carlo.

He was young yet, still lived in a world where every betrayal was an astonishment. Hopeless, really, talking to him.

Tarmac humming beneath them, they raced along the road. To their left the ocean, impossibly blue as always, and today impossibly flat; to their right palm trees and thorn bushes in the sandy brick-red soil. They drove past the Salim Ginnery, past the Protestant church. Past a dusty Asian shop crouched beneath drooping ragged palms. Past the walled compounds of the wealthy Europeans—glimpses through wrought iron gates of gardens, carnations and chrysanthemums, trellises slung with bougainvillea and jasmine and rose.

"They are Giriyama, aren't they, sergeant," said Kobari.

"What?" Andrew turned to him. "Who?" Thinking of those cool complacent estates: no Giriyama there, certainly, except as servants.

"The Smoke People," Kobari said.

Andrew frowned, annoyed. He was himself a Giriyama tribesman. Kobari was a Ki-

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kuyu. Like every important civil servant in the government, like nearly every member of the constabulary. Like fat Sergeant Oto, for example, who was handling the dispatcher's chores today. Andrew could picture him receiving the report. Thoughtfully puffing out his puffy cheeks, "One of the Smoke People, is it. We'll put Mbutu on that—his sort, after all. And mucking about in all that offal, maybe that'll bring him down a peg or two."

But no smirk lurked within Kobari's question; the constable was guileless. Rather irritatingly so at the moment, when Andrew would have quite enjoyed a target for his spleen.

"Yes," Andrew told him simply.

Kobari nodded. "They live there all their lives?"

Andrew sighed; no getting away from it. He had become, by tribal right, the constabulary's resident expert on Smoke People. "Some have," he said. "But their lives seldom last long. Isn't this the turnoff?"

At their destination, two kilometers farther on, a grey Citroën 2-CV, weathered and dented, had been pulled over to the side of the dirt road beneath an acacia tree. Standing beside the car, holding a handkerchief to his face, looking uncomfortable in his limp black suit, and extraordinarily out of place against a backdrop of trees and shrubbery, was Dr. Murmajee, the Township's pathologist.

Kobari swept past the Citroën and brought the Toyota to an elaborate stop. Andrew opened the door and stepped out, wincing at the awful stench from the garbage dump. The smell, bad enough for the last few hundred feet in the Land Cruiser, was here truly appalling: scorched hair and fiber; putrescence, long advanced, both animal and vegetable.

Murmajee approached, switching the handkerchief to his left hand, holding out his right. "Beastly, isn't it, sergeant?" he said, and daubed his shiny forehead with the white cloth. "Disease, yes, and death, of course, we deal with those often enough, oh my yes, but this . . ." He shook his head, made a delicate little shiver.

"Yes," agreed Andrew. Breathing through his mouth but damned if he'd stick a nappy up his nose. "Have you examined the body?"

"Oh, but I only just got here, you see," said Murmajee. He pressed the handkerchief lightly to his face. "And I thought I would wait, you see, for the proper authorities. Yourself, and, yes of course, the good constable."

Wants a bit of moral support, thought Andrew. Anywhere else, he'd be prodding the corpse

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already, humming and cooing, mama tickling a babe. Well, fair enough; who could blame him?

Andrew stepped around the Citroën and walked to the rim of the pit. It was perhaps seventy-five meters long, forty wide, twenty deep. Low rambling piles of black, unidentifiable rubble lined its floor, some still slowly smoldering; oily smoke drifted among them, rose here and there in thin grey streamers. The place was desolate, bleak and blasted.

Gehenna, Andrew thought, remembering the stories of the mission priests.

To his left, wide enough for the trucks that each day delivered the Township's refuse, a track sloped down into the murk and reek.

He turned to Dr. Murmajee. "You are coming, doctor?"

Murmajee's round shoulders rose and sank in a slow sigh. Behind him, Constable Kobari had found a handkerchief of his own, had tied it across his lower face. A desperado planning to ambush the stagecoach to Dodge City.

Andrew started off along the track. Sand rustled beneath his heavy police brogues; gravel scuttled, clicking, down the incline.

From the track's end, at the bottom, a narrow path ran along the side of the pit, skirting the mounds of smoking rubbish. Down here, some of this stuff was recognizable: caved-in oil drums, a heap of rotting vegetable slops, empty food tins large and small, collapsed cardboard boxes, plastic bleach containers. The smell was much worse now; the air was thick, unmoving, congealed. Andrew stepped cautiously, careful not to stumble, fall: perhaps prick or slash himself on some barb of rusted metal. Teeming no doubt with tetanus and a million other, likely nastier, microbes.

A sudden movement to his right. A piebald dog, skin sucked flat against its ribs, tail curled between its legs, slunk off through the smoke. A dog would be a necessity down here, yes, certainly: for the rats.

At the far end of the pit sat two small huts, thrown together of uneven sections of corrugated iron, bits of planking and cardboard, lengths of rope and twine. And before the huts, waiting, their faces blank and impassive, stood the Smoke People.

The man wore a stained and tattered khaki shirt, a pair of black britches that came down only to his calves, a pair of yellow plastic sandals several sizes too large. The two women, their heads shaven, wore *kangas,* lengths of printed cotton tied above their breasts and falling

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to below their knees. One of the women, the younger, a girl really, had a child supported on her hip by a sling draped from her shoulders.

Andrew nodded to the group. "I am Sergeant Mbutu," he said in precise Swahili. "There has been a death reported?"

Neither of the women spoke. But the man nodded listlessly toward the nearer of the two huts. "He is in there."

Andrew turned to Kobari. "Get their names. Find out what happened." Then, with Murmajee beside him, he walked over to the hut. The entranceway was low; even Andrew was forced to crouch as he went in. An odor of unwashed bodies, sour, fetid.

Light came through an opening cut in the iron wall. Showed a single small room, a bare dirt floor. On Andrew's right, a shallow depression in the earth, holding some charred chunks of wood, a drift of ash. Beside it, a small pot, handle-less; a paper sack of cornmeal, for porridge; a whisky bottle half-filled with water; a small jar of white powder—salt or sugar. On Andrew's left was a bare mattress, battered and rent. The body, dressed only in cotton short pants, lay atop it.

Dr. Murmajee, handkerchief still against his face, shuffled to the mattress, lowered his thick body onto his haunches. As he busied himself, Andrew looked about the room.

Nothing much else to see. Clean enough, despite the rankness of the air. But barren: no other furniture, no decoration, no color, nothing.

"Humm," announced Dr. Murmajee.

Andrew turned. "Yes?"

Murmajee was nodding. "I believe, yes I think it quite likely, that the body was moved after death."

"I can see that, doctor," said Andrew patiently. "People seldom die with their hands carefully folded across their chests."

"Just so," said Murmajee into his handkerchief. "Indeed."

Andrew squatted down beside him and slipped a hand beneath the dead man's shoulder, gingerly, avoiding the flesh. He felt the mattress. Damp. "And they have washed him, as well."

Murmajee turned to him. "It is their custom, however; is it not?"

"Yes, but illegal until after we have finished an investigation. How long has he been dead?"

"Oh my. Not for so very long, no. Rigor is only beginning." He tapped blunt fingers against the cheek. "Here, you see, in the muscles of the face. With this heat, I should say, oh, two hours? Perhaps three?"

Ten o'clock now. So between

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seven and eight this morning.

"And the cause of death?"

As he studied the dead man, Murmajee's eyes narrowed thoughtfully above the handkerchief. "No obvious wounds or contusions. He looks healthy enough—quite surprisingly so, wouldn't you say? In his middle thirties, possibly. Oh my. Difficult." He turned to Andrew. "Cardiac arrest?"

"That is a description, doctor," Andrew pointed out, "and not an explanation."

"Yes," agreed Murmajee sadly. "I suppose an autopsy might tell us more. Will there be one?" Without any real enthusiasm; he preferred opening up Europeans.

"The C.I.D. will decide." Andrew stood. "You can say nothing about the possible cause?"

"Well . . . there *are* certain indications, you see. Pallor. Pupillary contraction. I might, yes, in different circumstances, I might very well suspect the use of drugs."

"Drugs?" said Andrew, surprised. "An overdose?"

Murmajee giggled. "Absurd, of course. The local Africans don't much care for that sort of thing—as you well know, yes, of course. And a chap like this, well, where would he obtain them, isn't it? I only say, mind you now, that I *might* suspect."

"Narcotics?" Andrew asked.

"One of those, perhaps, yes. One of the barbiturates, perhaps. Sometimes one can determine, you see, by the condition of the body. Regurgitation, convulsions. But washed like this, and rearranged, oh my, no, no." He shook his head unhappily. "Stomach contents, I'm very much afraid, are the only way."

Andrew nodded. "Thank you, doctor. You may go now."

Murmajee rose to his feet with a small grunt, bobbed his head at Andrew, and waddled out the door.

Outside, Kobari stood with his notebook open, still sporting his bandit's bandana. The three Smoke People hadn't moved. From Kobari, Andrew learned that the man was Simon Ngio; that the older woman was his wife, Martha; that the young girl with the child was Esther Ogoyo, wife to the dead man, Mathew.

Ngio had told Kobari that Esther Ogoyo awoke that morning at eight thirty and discovered that her husband was dead. She woke up Ngio and his wife, told them, and Ngio walked to the beach road, to one of the European houses, and reported the death.

Ignoring for the moment the women, who still stood silent and immobile, watching him, Andrew stepped over to Simon Ngio. The man was in his fifties, a few inches taller than Andrew, exceedingly thin, all

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bone and ligament and taut skin. His eyes, vacant and dull, were rimmed with red. Not from grief, Andrew knew; from *tembo,* palm wine: he recognized its morning-after fumes, spiky with acetone, on the man's breath.

Andrew said, "You were a good friend, of course, to the dead man."

Ngio nodded quickly. "Very good," he said, and his eyes slipped away. He had only two teeth, blackened stumps on his lower gum.

"You have lived here for how long?"

"Eight years."

Eight years of living in swill. How did they manage it? "And the dead man?"

"Four years." Ngio's glance kept sliding this way and that as he answered. Nervous. Guilty of something, surely; but not necessarily of murder. Of living, perhaps.

Andrew asked him, "What time in the morning do you usually awake?"

"At dawn," he said, and then his eyes darted, panicky, to his wife, a few feet away. As though he realized suddenly a danger in the admission. With a flicker of interest, Andrew looked at the woman, saw that she was following this carefully, her eyes watchful in the pinched, wrinkled face.

"And at what time," Andrew asked Ngio, "did you awake today?"

"Halfway through the third hour." Eight thirty. "When the woman came to tell me of her husband." He blinked, looked away. A poor liar.

"He was drinking last night," snapped Ngio's wife. Coming to the rescue. Her voice was rasping, serrated like a knife. "He always sleeps later when he drinks."

"True," Ngio said, and grinned with transparent, ridiculous, relief. "I drank much *tembo* last night."

Andrew nodded. "Was Mathew Agoyo also drinking last night?"

"Oh yes. We were good friends, we always shared our *tembo.*"

"Did he share with you his *dawa?*" Medicine, drugs.

"Dawa?" Eyes shifting rapidly, cornered. "What *dawa?*"

Ngio's wife spoke: "Mathew had no *dawa.*"

Andrew glanced at her. Sly old witch.

He looked at the young girl, the wife of the dead man. She was staring off, seemingly indifferent. Shock? Simple stupidity? Retarded, possibly. Awfully young to be trapped down here, without friends or other family, without hope.

The baby was awake now, gazing at Andrew. As indifferent, apparently, as its mother. Indifference, down here, would

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be a valuable habit to cultivate. Big brown eyes, clear skin. Anywhere else, he might grow up to be a healthy child. . . . Doomed, of course. Not the constabulary's problem, no.

He returned to Ngio. The man repeated his wife's words: "Mathew had no *dawa*."

Very imaginative.

Drugs of some kind, yes. And knowing it, these three had got together and concocted this fantasy. Eight thirty in the morning: nonsense. Andrew knew that the trucks began arriving at dawn, rumbling and creaking, engines groaning. No one could sleep through that.

But what drugs, and from where? These wretches, all together, hadn't enough money to buy aspirin, let alone narcotics. Every penny cadged would go for food, to supplement the scraps the Township let them cull from the garbage heaps, in exchange for tending the fires. Or for cheap *tembo,* to help them bridge one foul day to the next.

Found some pills or something amid the chicken bones and the soup tins? Possible, yes. But which one of them had found it? How had the man died? Accident, suicide? Murder? If the latter, Andrew would put his money on the old woman, the only one with enough cunning, or, for that matter, enough energy.

If not murder, why the lies?

He turned to Constable Kobari, said in English, "You watch these two for a few moments. I want to talk to the girl."

Kobari nodded, adjusted the top of his bandana with a casual curled finger. Really fancies that thing. Throw down the strongbox, marshall, or I'll fill you full of lead.

"Mrs. Ogoyo?" he said to the young woman. "Would you please step away with me for a moment?"

Mrs. Ngio edged closer to the girl. "Have you no pity? Her husband died only a few short hours ago." She turned to the girl with a theatrical look of concern.

"Oh," said Andrew, rather pleased. "How do you know he died only a few hours ago? From what I understood, you knew only that he died sometime during the night."

Her eyes narrowed. "You *polisi.* Always trying to trick people up, trying to fool them. Well, you can't fool me. We may be poor, but we're decent and honest. We have a right to be left alone in our grief. A few hours, I said, and naturally I meant that the hours of the nighttime were only a few hours past." Carried away by her own performance, she located a pocket of indignation, and challenged him: "What *else* could I mean?"

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Turning from Andrew, she put her arm around the young woman, squeezed her, clucked and muttered. The young woman seemed oblivious still. Then Mrs. Ngio, with an impressive display of wrath, nostrils distended, faced Andrew again. "Can't you see she suffers? Why do you plague her?"

Andrew was entertained: the hag doesn't trust the girl with this story any more than she trusts her husband.

He smiled pleasantly. "It will be very brief, I assure you."

Briefer than he intended. For just then he heard behind him a familiar voice. "Good *Lord,* Mbutu, what have you dragged us into now?"

Cadet Inspector Moi of the Criminal Investigation Directorate possessed a famous closetful of safari suits, each a subtly different pastel shade. Today's selection was lavender, and he held a handkerchief of matching hue to his nose, covering his rakish goatee, also famous, as he circled round a clutter of rusted food tins. Behind him was his sergeant, Hadrubal Inye.

"Ghastly," said Moi, his face puckered with distaste. "This is altogether too much, you know. Calling us out on something like this."

Andrew said, "It was not I who called C.I.D. And, as you know, to do so is standard procedure in the event of sudden death."

"'Course I know it, man. What do you take me for? But I saw that Indian fellow up top, the local chopper, and he tells me this is a simple case of cardiac arrest. Open and shut." Moi had spent a year on an exchange program at Scotland Yard, where he had learned how to select a tailor and how to speak, and to think, like Inspector Lestrade.

Andrew said, "There are several disturbing indications here . . ."

"Disturbing?" said Moi. "Hah. What astounds me is that *all* this rabble"—he nodded to the Smoke People—"haven't been disturbed to death. *Look* at this place, will you?" He shuddered. "Well, to business, eh? Where's the bag of bones?"

Andrew indicated the small hut.

Moi turned to his sergeant. "You trot inside, Inye, there's a good lad. Check to see if the Indian missed any knives or hatchets in the body, eh? Ha ha."

When Moi's back was turned, Inye rolled his eyes heavenward for Andrew's benefit.

"Now, Mbutu," said Moi. "Suppose you come fill me in, hmmm?" He stepped several paces away, carefully avoiding a greasy strip of automobile tire.

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Andrew approached him, explained what Dr. Murmajee, and later he himself, had come to suspect. Sergeant Inye interrupted briefly to report that he'd found nothing untoward in the hut.

"No, no," said Moi to Andrew at last. "You've got it all wrong, man. I know this sort. Give 'em a bottle of *tembo* and they can sleep half the bloody day away. The dead man? As I say, I'm surprised the entire lot of them hasn't croaked. Place is crawling with germs, rats the size of zebras. Could have died from a thousand different things." He raised his wrist, examined the face of his gold watch.

"An autopsy would—"

"Autopsy?" Eyebrows high. "You must be joking. The Indian's perfectly happy with cardiac arrest, and he'll say so on the death certificate. Not to worry, you've done a smashing job, no doubt. But you run along now. Inye and I'll finish up here, get the names spelled all proper for the report. Assuming, that is, that these vermin know how to spell." He chuckled.

"But if he did die of a drug overdose—"

"What of it? P'rhaps he did, P'rhaps, as you say, he found something in the trash. Drugs, whatever. What difference does it make? Man's dead, isn't he?"

That, it seemed to Andrew, was precisely the point. "But suppose he were poisoned?"

"Poisoned? By one of these others, you mean?" Moi laughed. "What, so they could obtain all his worldly goods?"

"An investigation, an autopsy—"

"Look here, Mbutu." Moi draped his arm, great comrades, over Andrew's shoulder; Andrew could smell the inspector's cologne, spicy sweet. "I realize they're Giriyama. Loyalty, et cetera, I can understand that. But, surely, man, even you can see they're not worth bothering over. Trash, eh? Riffraff, pure and simple. Suppose one of them *had* bumped off that geezer in there. Well, where's the loss? D'you think the Township wants the expense of a trial for something like this? Besides, what punishment could a court give any of them that's worse than what they've already got? Even hanging would be an improvement, eh?" Chuckling, he slapped Andrew lightly on the shoulder. "No, you let Inye and me take care of this. That's an order, now."

Andrew was busy all afternoon; it was not until late in the day that he could return to the pit.

"Inspector Moi probably won't like this," said Constable Kobari, tying on his bandana again

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as the two of them trod down the pathway toward the smoking heaps of garbage.

At mention of the complacent, patronizing Moi, Andrew went rigid. "If you like, you can wait in the car."

"No, sergeant, no. I didn't mean that. Only that he'll be angry. I'd like to see his face, eh? But no, of course, sergeant, we're together on this."

Touched, regretting his peevishness, Andrew nodded. "Yes." He smiled at Kobari's bandana. "We are buckaroos."

Kobari barked with laughter at the English word. "Buckaroos," he said, and laughed again.

The dead man's wife was inside her hut. Posting Kobari outside to keep away the Ngio woman, Andrew called out for, and received, permission to enter.

She sat, her face still empty, legs crossed beneath her *kanga*, on the bare mattress. The child lay beside her, its head on her lap, its large eyes watching Andrew as he squatted down to face the mother.

"Mrs. Ogoyo," he said, "I understand that this is a time of grief for you. But there are some questions that must be answered."

She looked over to him, looked away.

"The *daktari* who examined your husband," Andrew said, "feels that his death was caused by the taking of some kind of *dawa*. I believe that you know this to be true."

Again she looked, looked away. "Mathew had no *dawa*," she said, her voice flat.

The phrase had become a litany for these people.

"I believe," said Andrew, "that he did. Or that someone else here did."

Not facing him, she said in a dull monotone, "The other *polisi* told us that it was finished. The minister came with some others to take Mathew away."

"It is *not* finished," Andrew said, vexed at this implacable blankness.

And the baby began to cry, let out a shriek, twisted its round face into an ugly mask.

She lifted it, held it to her breasts, rubbed its back. In the same toneless voice, she said, "He has a head fever. It has been getting worse."

The baby wrenched himself in her arms to look back over at Andrew, and wailed again.

Suddenly an ogre, Andrew sat for a clumsy moment amid the hooting and keening. Finally, making reluctant amends, he asked, "Have you taken him to Dr. Sayjit's clinic?"

She stroked the baby's head. "It is too far for me to walk."

The clinic, open at all times, was perhaps five kilometers away. Andrew knew of African

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women, thirty years older than this one, who could, and often did, walk a hundred kilometers in two days.

"What of your husband?" he asked. "Why did he not take him?"

The baby, slowly calming, sobbed and gasped against her. "He said he would go soon," she told Andrew, and shrugged. "But it was far for him as well."

But no farther than—only a block from—the shops where he bought his *tembo*.

Suddenly the stupidity of all this enraged him. For the first time he spoke in Giriyama, shouting: "Why have a child at all, woman, if you refuse to take care of him?" He stood up quickly, jammed his hands into his pockets: they were trembling. "Bad enough you choose to live your own life in this filth—how dare you bring another into it?"

She had rocked back, away from his assault, face awry. Now she thrust herself forward, her mouth set in a stubborn line. "Women are for having babies."

"Not when they live in a pig sty!" He was sputtering with fury. At this brainless woman, this doomed child; at the combination of chance and choice that had brought them here (Giriyama, kinsmen); at himself and his shame; at everything.

Over the renewed howls of the baby, Andrew shouted, "If you can't give him the proper care, send him to one of the mission schools. They'll give him food and clothes and a chance to survive. Keep him *here,* and you give him a life even worse than your own."

"No!" she said, and wrapped her arms around the child. Her eyes were wide. "You can't take him from me! She said you would try!"

"Who said?" Then he knew. "The Ngio woman." He ripped his hands from his pockets, bent quickly toward her. *"What* did she say?"

She was crying now, cowering away from Andrew, clutching the screaming baby with all her strength.

"That if you told us what happened," Andrew snapped, "about the drugs, we would take away your child." He snarled: *"Fool!"*

She flinched, terrified. The baby screeched, great fearful yawps.

Andrew straightened, spun about, took two quick steps, breathing rapidly, raggedly; curdling with self-hate. Warrior, civil servant: terrorizer of feeble-minded women and ailing children.

When, after a few moments, he had got himself under control, his breathing steady, he turned to her. Slowly, deliberately, he said, "No one will force

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you to give up the baby." He heard the exhaustion in his voice; he felt drained and flimsy. He cleared his throat. "But I must know about this drug."

She sobbed, squeezing the baby closer to her.

"Tell me," Andrew said.

At last, she did.

Andrew stormed from her shack, ignoring a startled Kobari, and stalked to the shack of the Ngios. He slammed the ball of his fist at the side of the entranceway; the entire structure rattled.

"Woman," he bellowed, still in Giriyama. "Get out here!"

Mrs. Ngio appeared at the entrance. She looked at Andrew, made a sour face. "What lies has she been telling you?"

"Not another word," Andrew told her. "I want the bottle of drugs she gave you, and I want the radio."

The woman frowned, opened her mouth to speak.

"Not a word," Andrew said. "Get them. Now. Or I'll see that you spend the rest of your life in a prison cell."

An empty threat, but at that moment Andrew sounded extremely convincing.

She ducked back into the shack. Andrew waited. In less than a minute, she returned. She handed over a small plastic bottle filled with white tablets, and a black plastic transistor radio, the size of a small Bible. Andrew glared at her; she stared back, lifted her chin, intractable.

He turned, marched back to the girl's shack, slipped inside. She still sat on the mattress, still held the baby. Not speaking, Andrew set the radio on the earthen floor and slipped back out.

He jerked his head to Kobari. All the way up from the pit's bottom to the Toyota, he remained silent. Getting into the car, he yanked the door savagely shut behind him.

Kobari seated himself behind the wheel. "Sergeant?"

Lips compressed, Andrew shook his head.

Kobari turned on the ignition, backed up the car, turned it around, and set off down the dirt roadway.

When they reached the beach road, Andrew felt the bitter stiffness, the rage, begin to leave him. He took a deep breath, let it slowly out. He held up the bottle. "The dead man found these this morning. Or so he told his wife. She hadn't seen him since dawn, two hours before. She was busy with the baby. He took one of the tablets, she said. It made him feel very fine, so he took another. Which of course made him feel finer still, so he took some more. Ten more, she thinks. Within an hour he was dead. Vomiting,

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convulsions . . ." He looked out the window at the blue indifferent sea. *"Idiot."*

"What are they?"

"Morphine sulphate."

"Why didn't they tell us?"

"The old woman. She told the wife that if we learned that her husband had used unauthorized *Wazungu*"—European—"medicine, we would take away her baby."

"But why tell her that?"

"She wanted that bloody radio. The dead man got it in town a few weeks ago. He spent a good deal of time, it seems, begging in the neighborhood of the *tembo* shops, nosing about, making a nuisance of himself. He told his wife that someone gave it to him. He stole it, more likely. In any event, the old woman told the wife that she would keep silent about the *dawa* if the wife gave her the radio."

"And the wife truly believed we would take the baby?"

"An idiot, like her husband. She and the old woman washed the body—the old woman's idea, of course—and then they sent Ngio to call for us."

"So," said Kobari. "It was only an accident then, the death."

"An accident," Andrew said, and looked out the window. The man's life had been no doubt merely a series of accidents; why should his death be anything different?

He turned to Kobari. "But it's curious." He rattled the bottle of pills. "The label on these merely states the contents—the number of tablets and the dosage for each. No chemist's name, nothing else. And how did they get there, in the trash? Why would someone throw them away?"

Kobari shrugged. "Whoever owned them had no further use for them."

Andrew shook his head. "No. People—Africans and Europeans alike—usually keep their medicines long after the illness that requires them is over. As though the medicine were a kind of charm, and keeping it will prevent the illness from returning. Morphine, in particular, is for pain, any sort of pain, and can always be used again. And this was nearly a full bottle before that idiot got to it—if someone needed it for pain, why did he take so few?"

Another shrug from Kobari. "Could we get fingerprints from the bottle?"

"The idiot wiped the bottle off. And the rest of the idiots have all handled it."

"Perhaps if we checked the garbage where it was found."

"The wife doesn't know where he found it."

"Perhaps it was merely thrown away by accident, sergeant. Such things happen."

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Andrew nodded. He tapped the plastic bottle against his knee, looked out the window, turned back to Kobari. "Who has died recently? Within the past few weeks." Kobari collected obituaries; he considered, for some obscure reason, that doing so was part of his training as a police officer.

Kobari frowned. "European or African?"

"Both. Asian as well. Tourists, anyone. Natural deaths, I mean, or what appeared to be."

"Well," said Kobari, "there was Bwana Dinsmore, the manager of the fishing club. There was Miss Kaufman, the sister of the old German doctor. That Catholic priest—what was his name?"

"*Baba* Reilly."

"Yes. And Alysha, the wife of Ali the Drunk from the clinic. And Ruth Mbaio, from the Delight. Oh, and that tourist who drowned, the hippie."

"A busy time for deaths," Andrew said.

"The winds have stopped, and the rains have not yet started."

Andrew nodded. He thought for a moment. "I think," he said at last, "that we shall have to ask a few people some questions."

Andrew took the bottle of pills from his pocket, leaned forward in his chair, and set the bottle on the coffee table. The man blinked, looked at him, and said, "Where did you get those?"

"Do you know of the Smoke People?"

The man nodded.

"One of them died this morning. Of an overdose of those tablets."

The man said nothing, merely sat back in his chair, waiting.

"You will notice," Andrew said, "that the label on the bottle contains neither a chemist's nor a doctor's name. Clearly, the tablets were not issued as a prescription. So how could they have come into this man's hands? There were, it seemed to me, three possibilities. First, he simply found them in the trash. Second, he stole them from somewhere. The man's son has been ill, and he had been promising for some time to do something about it. He might have walked to Dr. Sayjit's clinic this morning—he had time to do so—and discovered them lying about somewhere. And pilfered them.

"Third, of course, someone could have given them to him. But if so, it must have been someone who had ready access to such things. And why would such a person give a dangerous drug to a man like this?"

Andrew paused for a moment; the other man shrugged.

"Blackmail occurred to me," said Andrew. "Several weeks

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ago, a woman died of what seemed to be natural causes. Curiously enough, her husband, I was informed, works in Dr. Sayjit's clinic. At approximately the time she died, the dead man came into possession of a transistor radio. Could he have seen something, I wondered, that enabled him to threaten the husband? To receive from the husband first the radio, and then the drugs?

"But I have since learned that Ali Bey, the husband, has been in Mombasa for a week, visiting his family. He could not have given the man these drugs today—and it is most likely that the man did take possession of the drugs today, for he seems to have begun taking them at very nearly the moment he obtained them."

Andrew shifted in his chair. "As for theft, the people living with him tried to persuade me that the man had died in his sleep. It is improbable that they would attempt to do so unless they were certain that the man had not come into town this morning: someone might have seen him, and invalidated their story. I enquired at the clinic, and, indeed, the man had not been there.

"So the conclusion seemed inescapable that the man, rooting about in the trash this morning, simply discovered them."

The other was watching Andrew carefully now.

Andrew said, "But why would anyone throw away a nearly full bottle of morphine sulphate?" One by one, he repeated the arguments against such an action that he had earlier given Kobari. "One possibility, however, is that someone had used the morphine to remove someone else, and then, fearing discovery, disposed of the drug. Now the only person in the Township, other than Ali Bey, who has access to these drugs and who has recently suffered the loss of someone close, is you, Dr. Kaufman."

Dr. Kaufman lowered his head and ran a bony hand, freckled with age spots, over his sparse white hair. Andrew waited, glanced around the sitting room. Large but simple, without the usual African gewgaws with which most Europeans cluttered their living space. Dark heavy wooden furniture. A *makouti* roof, thatch and mangrove pole, high above.

Dr. Kaufman looked up. "It is an interesting story, sergeant." The German accent was only barely noticeable.

Andrew said simply, "A man has died, doctor."

The doctor nodded. "Yes," he said. "Yes." He looked away, lifted the fingertips of his right hand to his temple, closed his eyes. In his late seventies, tall

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but stooped and frail: his grey shirt drooped from bony shoulders, his grey slacks sagged from bony knees.

He opened his eyes and asked Andrew, "Why did you come here alone?"

"I thought you would talk more freely to only one policeman." The same story he had told Kobari; but Dr. Kaufman was an estimable personage, had lived in the Township since before the European War, was respected, loved even; if Andrew were wrong, it were best the consequences fell only upon him.

Dr. Kaufman said, "You do not have a great deal of proof."

"No," Andrew admitted. "Not yet."

The doctor smiled. Sadly, the deep lines of his face barely deepening. "You are a most intelligent man, sergeant."

Andrew said nothing.

Dr. Kaufman looked around the sitting room, his glance slow and lingering, as though he were committing its contents to memory. Finally his eyes met Andrew's again. "Frieda had cancer," he said. He took a long deep breath. "Hepatic . . . of the liver, you understand? It was inoperable. By the time she told me about the pains, the disease was too far advanced. That was her way, you see. Refusing always to admit to any weakness."

He looked off, remembering; a small smile began. "She . . ." He shook his head, turned to Andrew, and said briskly, "We flew to Nairobi, we went through all the tests, but it was hopeless. Nothing could be done."

Another deep breath. "She refused painkillers of any kind. She wanted, she said, to maintain her clarity, to experience in its entirety this thing that was happening." He paused, frowned. "No. I make her sound like some kind of Valkyrie. Inhuman. She was not. She believed that this was as valid an experience as any other, and that so long as she were able, she would live it. It was a part of life, she said. It had, and it gave, a meaning. We discussed it. We agreed that when the pain became unbearable, when she asked me to end it for her, I would."

He looked off again for a moment, then returned to Andrew. "She made me promise to continue, afterward. To go on. We were very close, you see. She knew I would be tempted to end it for myself as well."

He cleared his throat, took another deep breath. "I watched her suffer for three months. I make no excuse, you understand, I only explain. For the last few weeks she could not sleep, could not lift herself from the bed. At night, from my room, I could hear her. Her

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body clenching. But she never cried out. . . . Finally she told me she was ready. I gave her the morphine tablets to put her under—she had a horror of needles. We had been—what is the phrase?—*rounded up* before the war. We escaped, with some others, from the camp, but the doctors—*doctors*—they had done things to her with needles. . . . And so, when she was asleep, I injected the strychnine . . ."

Dr. Kaufman stared down at the floor for a very long time. Andrew was silent. At last, not looking up, the doctor said, "I took an oath, you know, quite a long time ago. An oath not to take a life. I violated that oath once, and now it seems I have violated it again." He shook his head. "That poor wretch." He whispered, *"Gott."*

He looked up suddenly. "I want you to know that I did not throw away that bottle because I feared detection, as you put it. The coroner accepted my death certificate, no autopsy was performed, and what is more natural than morphine in a doctor's office? I threw away the syringe, but I carried the bottle with me for days. I am not sure why. A talisman? A connection, a link. I knew I could not use those tablets for anyone else. But one day, at last, I dropped it into the garbage cannister outside the post office. It was foolish, totally unforgivable —not because of this, not because it brought you here, no, but because of that man. Unforgivable . . ."

Abruptly, he pulled himself to his feet. "Well, it is over, yes? You will not need your"—he smiled—"manacles? I will give you no trouble. But if I might be allowed to bring with me a few small things?"

Andrew knew, all at once, what the doctor intended. The double violation of the oath overrode the single promise to the sister.

"No, doctor," he said.

The next morning, the chief called Andrew in. Sitting behind his desk, his round head and thick shoulders outlined by the light from the window behind, he held a sheet of paper in his hands. Andrew sat down.

"I've got the report from the C.I.D." Tapping the paper. "That man at the municipal dump. According to Moi, the matter is straightforward, and Murmajee has signed to cardiac arrest. I'm never altogether certain about Murmajee, you know that, and as for Moi . . ." He shook his head, smiling. "I'd like to know if all this sits right with you. Is that what you think happened?"

A good man, absurdly honest by the standards of this con-

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stabulary, and a great deal more intelligent—astonishingly so at times—than he looked: face like a fist, body all beef and brawn, slow moving, stolid. And a man who knew Andrew, gave him more leeway and respect than most superiors, more than any other Kikuyu ever would.

For the first time in his life, Andrew lied to him. "Yes," he said.

One case of euthanasia; another, at the very worst, of manslaughter; and certain acquittal on each. But for the rest of his life, long or short, the doctor would have to live with the chatter that turned to whisper, the stares that danced away.

Now he had to live, like Andrew, only with himself. And Andrew had arranged a penance for them both. The baby of the dead man: the two of them would make certain that it became, and remained, a healthy child.

Andrew left the chief's office, crossed the squad room, stepped outside into the bustle of sunshine. In the shade of the jacaranda, Kobari waited by the Land Cruiser. Kobari, too, could live with the lie and with himself. And Andrew had made him swear that if the truth ever came out, and he were questioned, he would say that he acted under Andrew's orders. Kobari had sworn, his grin signalling another lie.

Now Kobari said, "It went all right, then."

Andrew nodded, smiling. It had all gone a great deal better than anyone might have expected.

"Good," said Kobari, and smiled back.

They got into the car, pulled shut the doors. Kobari slid the key into the ignition, then turned to Andrew with a frown. "Only one thing of all this still disturbs me, sergeant."

"And that is?"

"That radio. I checked the robbery reports, and it wasn't listed. Where would a man like that get such a thing?"

Bothersome, true: an unlikely gift for one of the Smoke People to receive. The ironic truth (or the farcical; or the tragic; and a truth Andrew had told not even Kobari) was that its batteries had died a week ago, and none of those people, none of the four, had known enough to buy new ones.

"I don't know," Andrew said. "Most likely, we'll never know."

Kobari nodded, snapped the ignition, rammed the stick shift forward, and floored the gas pedal.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

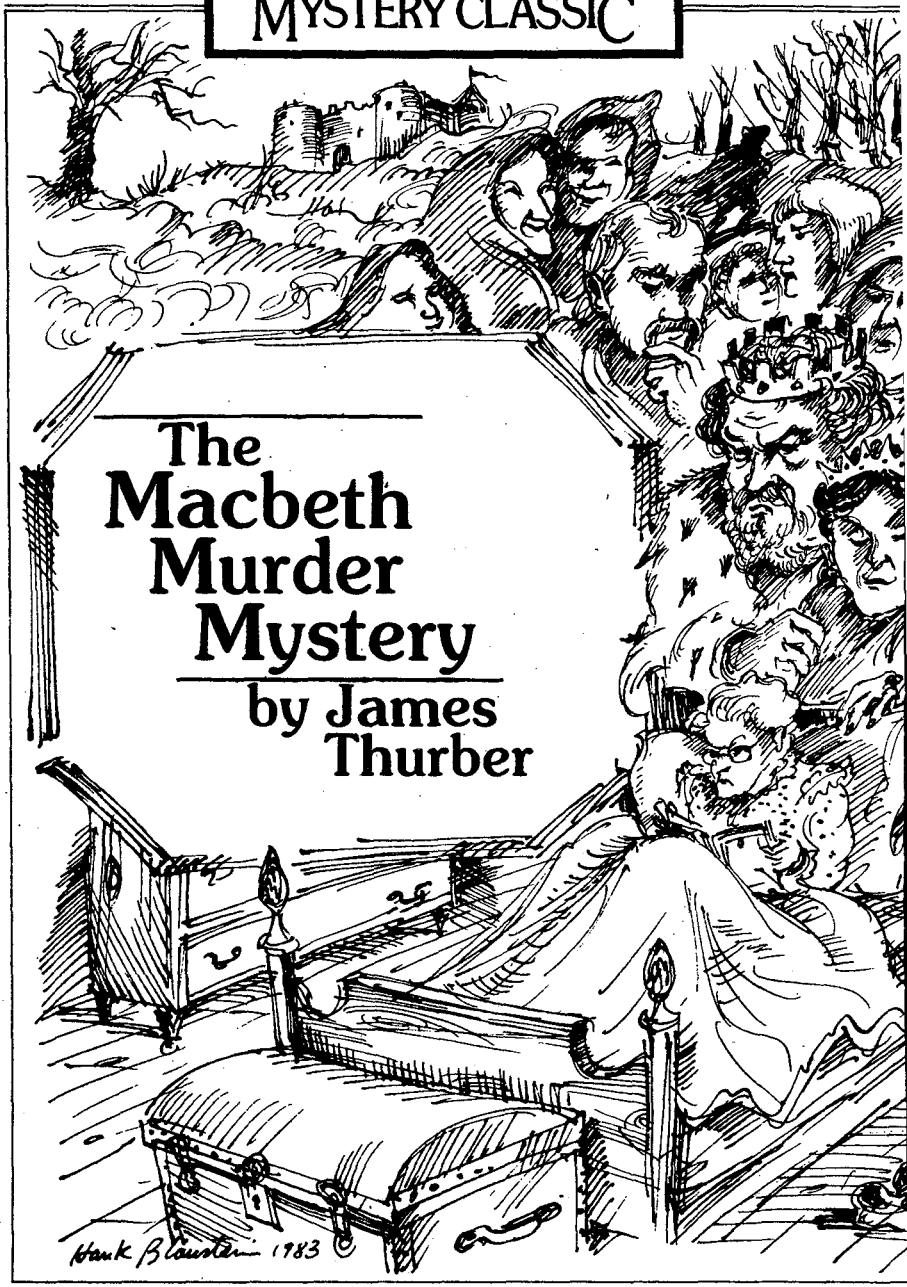


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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"It was a stupid mistake to make," said the American woman I had met at my hotel in the English lake country, "but it was on the counter with the other Penguin books—the little sixpenny ones, you know, with the paper covers—and I supposed of course it was a detective story. All the others were detective stories. I'd read all the others, so I bought this one without really looking at it carefully. You can imagine how mad I was when I found it was Shakespeare." I murmured something sympathetically. "I don't see why the Penguin-books people had to get out Shakespeare plays in the same size and everything as the detective stories," went on my companion. "I think they have different-colored jackets," I said. "Well, I didn't notice that," she said. "Anyway, I got real comfy in bed that night and all ready to read a good mystery story and here I had *The Tragedy of Macbeth*—a book for high school students. Like *Ivanhoe.*" "Or *Lorna Doone,*" I said. "Exactly," said the American lady. "And I was just crazy for a good Agatha Christie, or something. Hercule Poirot is my favorite detective." "Is he the rabbity one?" I asked. "Oh, no," said my crime-fiction expert. "He's the Belgian one. You're thinking of Mr. Pinkerton, the one that helps Inspector Bull. He's good, too."

Over her second cup of tea my companion began to tell the plot of a detective story that had fooled her completely—it seems it was the old family doctor all the time. But I cut in on her. "Tell me," I said. "Did you read *Macbeth?*" "I *had* to read it," she said. "There wasn't a scrap of anything else to read in the whole room." "Did you like it?" I asked. "No, I did not," she said, decisively. "In the first place, I don't think for a moment that Macbeth did it." I looked at her blankly. "Did what?" I asked. "I don't think for a moment that he killed the king," she said. "I don't think the Macbeth woman was mixed up in it, either. You suspect them the most, of course, but those are the ones that are never guilty—or shouldn't be, anyway." "I'm afraid," I began, "that I—" "But don't you see?" said the American lady. "It would spoil everything if you could figure out right away who did it. Shakespeare was too smart for that. I've read that people never *have* figured out *Hamlet,* so it isn't likely Shakespeare would have made *Macbeth* as simple as it seems." I thought this over while I filled my pipe. "Who do you suspect?" I asked, suddenly. "Macduff," she said, promptly. "Good God!" I whispered, softly.

"Oh Macduff did it, all right," said the murder specialist. "Her-

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cule Poirot would have got him easily." "How did you figure it out?" I demanded. "Well," she said, "I didn't right away. At first I suspected Banquo. And then, of course, he was the second person killed. That was good right in there, that part. The person you suspect of the first murder should always be the second victim." "Is that so?" I murmured. "Oh, yes," said my informant. "They have to keep surprising you. Well, after the second murder I didn't know *who* the killer was for a while." "How about Malcolm and Donalbain, the king's sons?" I asked. "As I remember it, they fled right after the first murder. That looks suspicious." "Too suspicious," said the American lady. "Much too suspicious. When they flee, they're never guilty. You can count on that." "I believe," I said, "I'll have a brandy," and I summoned the waiter. My companion leaned toward me, her eyes bright, her teacup quivering. "Do you know who discovered Duncan's body?" she demanded. I said I was sorry, but I had forgotten. "Macduff discovers it," she said, slipping into the historical present. "Then he comes running downstairs and shouts, 'Confusion has broke open the Lord's anointed temple' and 'Sacrilegious murder has made his masterpiece' and on and on like that." The good lady tapped me on the knee. "All that stuff was rehearsed," she said. "You wouldn't say a lot of stuff like that, offhand, would you—if you had found a body?" She fixed me with a glittering eye. "I—" I began. "You're right!" she said. "You wouldn't! Unless you had practiced it in advance. 'My God, there's a body in here!' is what an innocent man would say." She sat back with a confident glare.

I thought for a while. "But what do you make of the Third Murderer?" I asked. "You know, the Third Murderer has puzzled *Macbeth* scholars for three hundred years." "That's because they never thought of Macduff," said the American lady. "It was Macduff, I'm certain. You couldn't have one of the victims murdered by two ordinary thugs—the murderer always has to be somebody important." "But what about the banquet scene?" I asked, after a moment. "How do you account for Macbeth's guilty actions there, when Banquo's ghost came in and sat in his chair?" The lady leaned forward and tapped me on the knee again. "There wasn't any ghost," she said. "A big, strong man like that doesn't go around seeing ghosts—especially in a brightly lighted banquet hall with dozens of people around. Macbeth was *shielding somebody!*" "Who was he shielding?" I asked. "Mrs. Macbeth, of course," she said. "He thought she did it and he was going to take the rap himself.

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The husband always does that when the wife is suspected." "But what," I demanded, "about the sleepwalking scene then?" "The same thing, only the other way around," said my companion. "That time *she* was shielding *him*. She wasn't asleep at all. Do you remember where it says, 'Enter Lady Macbeth with a taper'?" "Yes," I said. "Well, people who walk in their sleep *never carry lights!*" said my fellow-traveler. "They have a second sight. Did you ever hear of a sleepwalker carrying a light?" "No," I said, "I never did." "Well, then, she wasn't asleep. She was acting guilty to shield Macbeth." "I think," I said, "I'll have another brandy," and I called the waiter. When he brought it, I drank it rapidly and rose to go. "I believe," I said, "that you have got hold of something. Would you lend me that *Macbeth?* I'd like to look it over tonight. I don't feel, somehow, as if I'd ever really read it." "I'll get it for you," she said. "But you'll find that I am right."

I read the play over carefully that night, and the next morning, after breakfast, I sought out the American woman. She was on the putting green, and I came up behind her silently and took her arm. She gave an exclamation. "Could I see you alone?" I asked, in a low voice. She nodded cautiously and followed me to a secluded spot. "You've found out something?" she breathed. "I've found out," I said, triumphantly, "the name of the murderer!" "You mean it wasn't Macduff?" she said. "Macduff is as innocent of those murders," I said, "as Macbeth and the Macbeth woman." I opened the copy of the play, which I had with me, and turned to Act II, Scene 2. "Here," I said, "you will see where Lady Macbeth says, 'I laid their daggers ready. He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done it.' Do you see?" "No," said the American woman, bluntly, "I don't." "But it's simple!" I exclaimed. "I wonder I didn't see it years ago. The reason Duncan resembled Lady Macbeth's father as he slept is that *it actually was her father!*" "Good God!" breathed my companion, softly. "Lady Macbeth's father killed the king," I said, "and, hearing someone coming, thrust the body under the bed and crawled into the bed himself." "But," said the lady, "you can't have a murderer who only appears in the story once. You can't have that." "I know that," I said, and I turned to Act II, Scene 4. "It says here, 'Enter Ross with an old Man.' Now, that old man is never identified and it is my contention he was old Mr. Macbeth, whose ambition it was to make his daughter queen. There you have your motive." "But even then," cried the

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American lady, "he's still a minor character!" "Not," I said, gleefully, "when you realize that he was also *one of the weird sisters in disguise!*" "You mean one of the three witches?" "Precisely," I said. "Listen to this speech of the old man's. 'On Tuesday last, a falcon towering in her pride of place, was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.' Who does that sound like?" "It sounds like the way the three witches talk," said my companion, reluctantly. "Precisely!" I said again. "Well," said the American woman, "maybe you're right, but—" "I'm sure I am," I said. "And do you know what I'm going to do now?" "No," she said. "What?" "Buy a copy of *Hamlet,*" I said, "and solve *that!*" My companion's eye brightened. "Then," she said, "you don't think Hamlet did it?" "I am," I said, "absolutely positive he didn't." "But who," she demanded, "do you suspect?" I looked at her cryptically. "Everybody," I said, and disappeared into a small grove of trees as silently as I had come.

SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Anna is the murderess.

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THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress/Magnum

The May Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Charles B. Dorsey of Rialto, California. Honorable mentions go to Frank J. Prince of Greendale, Wisconsin; Charles R. Koehler of East Orleans, Massachusetts; Linda O. Johnston of Studio City, California; M. K. Harrington of Claremont, California; David K. Harford of Bradford, Pennsylvania; Edward Mitchell of Weatherford, Texas; Dave Geible of Atlantic City, Wyoming; and Tom Bloor of Shelbyville, Illinois.

ESCAPE
by Charles B. Dorsey

Simon could hear the group of terrorists below him, plotting to blow up the oil rig just down the coast. Now that he knew all the details, if he could just get away and get some help, they could capture the whole gang.

Simon crawled over to a hole in the roof and climbed out onto the roof. Then, very quietly, he made his way to the other side, where he knew there was a porch. He climbed down to the roof on the porch, and from there he jumped to the ground.

He hit the ground in a roll and got up running, headed for the house and the transmitter. He heard a commotion behind him and knew that they had heard him. He made it to the bushes he was headed for, but they were in hot pursuit.

They had spread out and he had to crawl from bush to bush to keep out of sight. Several times he thought they had him. Near the house he decided to run for it. He was in the house and halfway up the stairs when he heard, "Hold it right there." He froze in his tracks.

"You didn't think you could get away with it did you?" Simon turned slowly toward the voice. "No, Mom," he said. "I'll get back outside and clean up."

Maybe tomorrow there'd be more terrorists, or even spies to escape from, but the transmitter would have to be moved outside the house.

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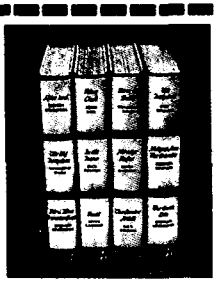
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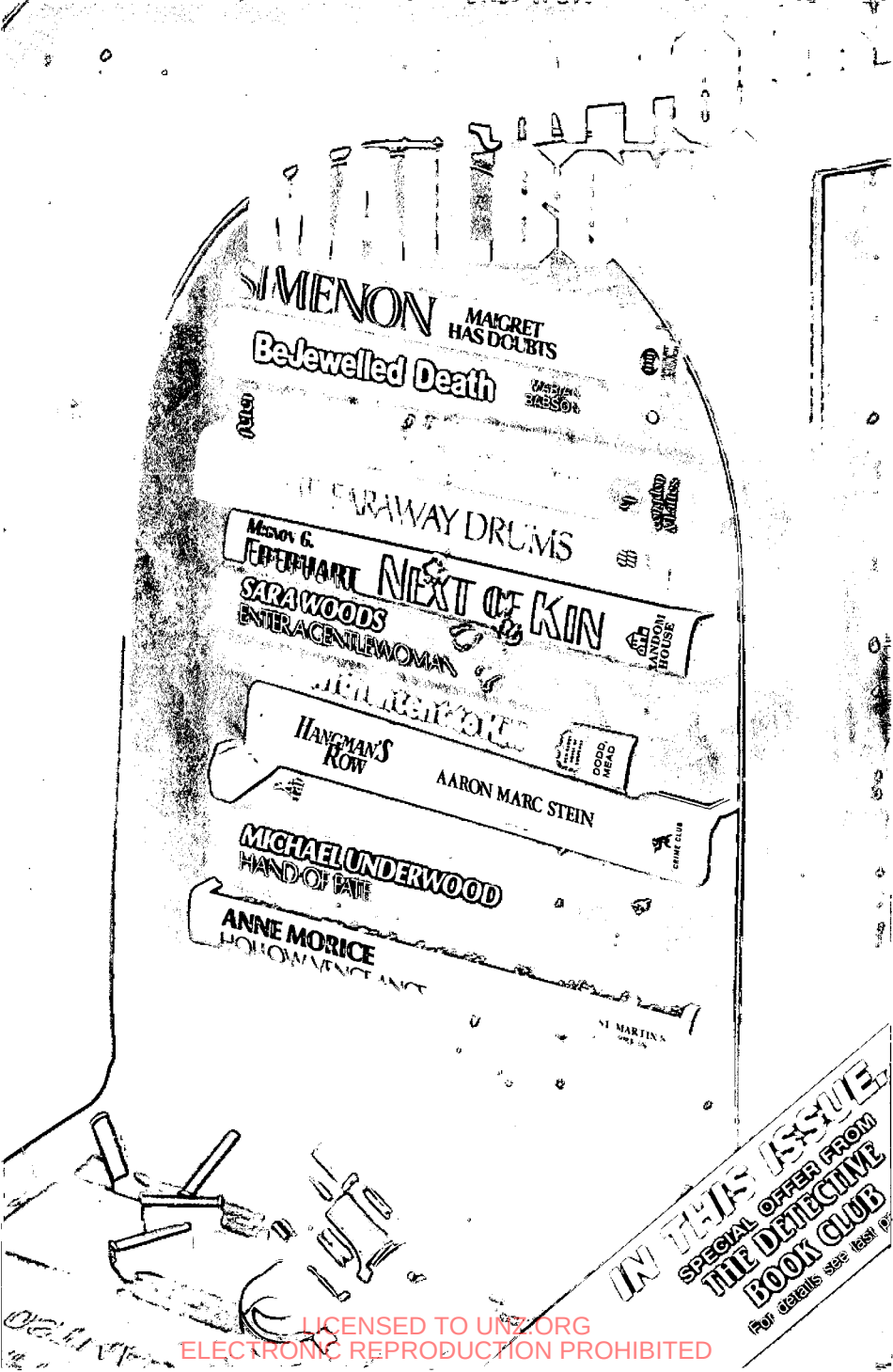
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